

Air cargo dispute stalls local airport's funding hopes

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AUBURN — A federal labor dispute between shipping giants Federal Express and United Parcel Service may have stalled the DeKalb County Airport runway extension project, according to airport manager Russ Couchman.

Couchman said 95 percent of the runway extension project will be funded through the Federal Aviation Administration's airport improvement program. The problem — Congress has yet to pass the FAA Re-authorization Act of 2009, originally introduced in February 2009.

Until Congress hashes out the fine print of the bill, including the FedEx versus UPS issue, FAA grants are in short supply.

"The FAA has indicated it will not have enough time or funds to issue grants in June," Paul Shaffer, a civil engineer and manager of airport development with Butler, Fairman and Seufert, wrote in his printed report to the local airport authority. "We will have to continue to wait. We hope July will offer better results."

Shaffer told the DeKalb County Airport Authority that the FAA's 19th extension of the continuing resolution authorized only a small portion of airport improvement funds.

The contention over the re-authorization act boils down to a squabble between FedEx and UPS, Couchman said. Since 2009, the shipping companies have been battling over whether FedEx's workers should be regulated by the National Labor Relations Act, as is UPS. FedEx is currently subject to the more-lenient Railway Labor Act, which governs labor relations for railroads and airlines.

Because of the dispute, which has made its way to lawmakers, the FAA has been operating under a series of extensions, or continuing resolutions, to allow it to operate without a complete re-authorization from Congress.

"The continuing resolution really has nothing to do with other governmental spending problems," Couchman said. "It really is about a labor dispute between two giants."

In the meantime, Shaffer said, his firm will continue working on an agreement for the next round of grants, as soon as funds become available.

A 20th extension was introduced Wednesday by House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman, Rep. John Mica. The new extension would give lawmakers until July 22 to pass a new, multi-year reauthorization of the FAA. It also promises a total of \$2.8 million in airport improvement funds to get the ball rolling on local airport improvement projects across the country. Both the House and Senate are expected to pass the resolution, Couchman said.

But, until a full re-authorization is passed, Couchman said the airport is in a watch-and-see mode.

"We really don't know what will happen between now and then," Couchman said.

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