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Sequester short-changes the future of America’s airports

By Deborah C. McElroy - 09/10/13 03:30 PM ET

Now that we’re into September, it’s the ideal time to take stock of another busy summer travel season for air travel in the U.S. For the most part, the industry appeared quite sunny. Air travel during both the July 4 and Labor Day holidays ticked up slightly from previous years, and domestic airlines reported a modest profit.

But for U.S. airports, the summer of 2013 was cloudier. Throughout the season, many airports experienced extraordinarily long lines at ports of entry due to sequestration’s prevention of overtime use for Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers. Some airports also faced long lines at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) passenger screening checkpoint because of similar funding limitations.

As the current fiscal year winds down with no apparent agreement as to how to rectify sequestration, there’s a strong chance that such delays could become standard until the parties in Washington can agree on a long term funding solution for the federal government. But airports’ concerns aren’t limited to long CBP and TSA lines. A protracted budget sequester could also undermine the future safety, efficiency, and quality of U.S. airports, weakening U.S. global competitiveness and undermining the economic engines that airports are to their local communities and the U.S. economy as a whole.

In late April, air traffic controllers were furloughed due to sequestration-mandated budget cuts, causing flight delays at airports across the country. Congress ultimately found a bipartisan solution to end these furloughs, but it was in the form of a $253 million diversion from the Airport Improvement Program (AIP), the grant program that provides critical funding for improving runways and terminals. In other words, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) operations were funded at the expense of very facilities it oversees.

With fiscal year 2014 now in clear view, AIP grants may again be viewed as FAA's preferred scapegoat to bridge its budgetary stop-gaps. Such a misguided proposal disregards the fact that passengers are paying a portion of their airline ticket taxes for airport capital improvements, in particular safety and security projects necessary to keep U.S. airports’ infrastructure reliable and competitive with the rest of the world. Far from being a piggybank into which Congress can dip to cover short-term budget solutions, these funds ensure airports can make essential, long-term investments in constructing and upgrading facilities. Using the funding that passengers pay for airport improvements to again address FAA’s sequestration problem is the equivalent of bait and switch and is not in the long term interests of the U.S. aviation system.

There is one mechanism, however, not beholden to the federal budget that will make airports whole: the passenger facility charge (PFC). The PFC user fee, like AIP grants, pays for the many necessary airport improvements that enhance safety, security and capacity. A small, indexed increase in the PFC will help guarantee that airports can continue to provide safe, secure and efficient facilities, as well as help continue to generate valuable economic activity in their surrounding communities.

These problems—whether reduced funding for critical airport projects or unacceptable wait times for passengers at CBP and TSA checkpoints—must be resolved. If we continuously short-change our airports, we only further diminish the competitiveness of the U.S. commercial aviation industry and the considerable economic activity it supports. U.S. airports serve as the front door for their communities, providing the first impressions for millions of domestic and international air travelers each year and, according to a 2010 study, they support an estimated $1.2 trillion or 8 percent of our total GDP.

2013 has offered us a glimpse of what the future could hold for U.S. airports, and it's not a pleasant picture. It's imperative that Congress and the White House agree that fiscal year 2014 does not continue to subject U.S. airports to additional cuts to infrastructure grants and federal funding for security and facilitation. Jeopardizing the ability of U.S. airports to fund the critical safety and security investments that benefit passengers, foster competition, strengthen their local economies and create jobs only short-changes our air-travel industry's long-term competitiveness.

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