

Local Airport Involvement Vital To Success of NextGen

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Over the last few years, there has been a lot of talk about the Next-Generation Air Transportation System. Most of it has focused on how NextGen will allow aviation to transition to a satellite-based navigation system and help the airlines operate more efficiently. But decision makers in Congress and the FAA must understand that NextGen begins and ends at airports.

Recognizing this, a recent report by the RTCA NextGen Task Force focused its recommendations on areas directly impacting airports -- surface, runway access, metroplex operations and national airspace system access.

Airports are the doorways to the National Airspace System. Delays and congestion at these doorways directly harm communities' economic competitiveness by increasing travel and shipping costs. They leave the traveling public discouraged and frustrated, unable to reliably schedule meetings and vacations. The impacts extend far beyond airports in congested metropolitan areas. Smaller airports with air service to these major cities are frequently affected by ground delays.

NextGen promises to reduce these delays by reducing the impact that poor weather conditions have on airport capacity, reducing delay-causing interactions among nearby airports and enabling more effective use of existing infrastructure. These benefits will result from enhanced airport surface surveillance and traffic management, improved flight procedures and reduced separations, all of which are enabled through implementation of NextGen surveillance, communications, and navigation technologies.

Each airport is unique, with its operations determined by local geography, demographics, usage patterns and budgets. One size will not fit all. As the FAA begins to implement NextGen, it needs to tailor solutions to each airport's unique operational issues, including procedure development, infrastructure improvements and environmental evaluations.

These solutions will involve NextGen together with continuing investments in traditional airport facilities—including new runways, taxiways, terminals and ground transportation facilities. From the airport's perspective, NextGen must be incorporated into its mainstream planning – it cannot simply be an addendum. NextGen technology must be taken into consideration in planning for additional ground and runway capacity, addressing environmental challenges and funding the future equipment needed at the airport.

One of the most daunting challenges will be addressing environmental impacts, particularly noise, of new flight procedures and dealing with complex interdependencies among airports in congested metroplexes. These challenges require tailored local answers, as well as substantial local political support for NextGen to succeed.

Local airports have already partnered with the airlines and the FAA in pilot implementation of some NextGen technology. There have been technology trials at Memphis and Louisville as well as procedure developments at San Francisco, Seattle, Juneau and Newark. The FAA should actively encourage and fund more of these local efforts. At the same time, we need robust, multiyear FAA reauthorization that includes a fully funded Airport Improvement Program and an increase in the Passenger Facility Charge (PFC) so that airports can ensure their

traditional infrastructure needs keep up with NextGen enhancements. Indeed, there will be no NextGen without a PFC increase.

Airlines and the FAA must realize not all NextGen elements are appropriate for every airport. At non-hub airports, NextGen solutions can improve safety, enhance surveillance and lower approach minimums. By contrast, at large hubs the full range of NextGen technology will increase capacity, reduce airport interactions and foster new airfield development concepts.

One key finding of the task force is that FAA must streamline the NextGen certifications along with the operations and environmental approval processes. FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt's decision to locate a NextGen specialist at every FAA Flight Standards regional office is a critical first step. These liaisons will ensure the FAA's safety workforce understands where the agency is headed with NextGen.

The implementation of NextGen has already begun. For the implementation to be successful, it is abundantly clear: NextGen is also local.