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Congressman talks Essential Air Service funding at Burlington airport

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John Lovretta/The Hawk Eye

A grounds crew member waves to an Air Choice One plane as it takes off following a ribbon cutting ceremony with the Southeast Iowa Regional Airport and Air Choice One to mark the initial flight from Burlington to the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Nov. 7, 2016 at the Southeast Iowa Regional Airport in Burlington. Air Choice One also is adding the Twin Cities service to Dodge and Mason City.

U.S. Rep. Dave Loebsack visited the Southeast Iowa Regional Airport Friday to express his commitment for funding and hear about other issues faced by the rural airport industry.

Loebsack, a Democrat from Iowa City representing the 2nd Congressional District, has been touring the area for the last two weeks during a spring recess period in Congress.

As he traveled the district, Loebsack has made several stops to local institutions that would be negatively affected by President Donald Trump's 2018 budget proposal.

On the chopping block is the U.S. Department of Transportation's Essential Air Services program, subsidizing commercial air service to rural airports such as the Southeast Iowa Regional Airport in Burlington.

The airport would lose its daily flights to Minneapolis, which started last month, as well as its daily flights to St. Louis and Chicago if the president's budget was signed into law.

According to the budget blueprint, \$175 million in discretionary spending would be saved by eliminating the program.

Of that amount, airport director Mary Beaird has said the Burlington airport would lose about \$2 million used to offset costs for its five daily flights provided by the aircraft carrier Air Choice One.

“Air Choice One has really served us very well,” Beaird told Loeb sack. “We have about 15,000 people flying in and out per year, so the cuts would affect those folks as well as the economy of the area.”

Beyond the jobs directly employed by the airport, Beaird mentioned the Avis car rental service and its employees, construction work done at the airport and even the Casey’s convenience store across the street that benefits from airport traffic.

“There’s a lot of job opportunities, and you just don’t want to overlook those positive impacts to our economy,” Beaird said, pointing out the federally funded apron rehabilitation project happening this summer and the hangar currently being constructed.

Consistent target

This is not the first time the EAS program has been considered for elimination since its implementation in 1978. But because of its noted importance to the regions it serves, the program has continued to survive past budget talks.

To be eligible for funding, a community must maintain an average of 10 enplanements or more per service day during the most recent fiscal year.

In his budget, President Trump said EAS was implemented 40 years ago as a “temporary program” propping up airports whose flights are “not full” and “have high subsidy costs per passenger.”

The 2018 blueprint provides guidance from the Trump administration for how it thinks Congress should appropriate money for the next fiscal year beginning Oct. 1.

Leaders in the House of Representatives and Senate have begun crafting their own budget priorities that must be reconciled before the president can consider signing it. If Congress and the White House cannot reach an agreement, they can implement a short-term spending plan known as a continuing resolution, now in place.

The spending bill enacted under former President Barack Obama expires next Friday, meaning Congress will need to reach at least a short-term agreement on how to fund the government by that date or risk a federal shut-down. Senators and representatives will return to work Tuesday in Washington, D.C.

“I’ll continue to do what I can to keep the money in there,” Loeb sack said about the Essential Air Service funding. “But it’s not surprising to me that the Trump administration went after it the way they did.”

Pilots needed

Beaird and Air Choice One CEO Shane Storz also discussed with the congressman the problems they face in attracting pilots.

Daniel Steiner, 19, of Mediapolis is in the process of completing the 1,500 hours of flight training necessary to acquire his commercial pilot license.

“I actually never considered it as a career, as an idea out there, until somebody took me up (in a plane) and I thought, ‘Hey, this is pretty cool,’” Steiner said.

After beginning his commercial flight training at Indian Hills Community College in Ottumwa, Steiner said he began to think seriously about a career in aviation.

“I think for me it kind of opened up that aviation is an idea, that aviation is out there,” he said. “But I feel like, with this pilot shortage, there obviously isn’t students out there that are thinking this is an optional career, or that it’s out there. We need to work together to bring it out to the general public and the high schools.”

More visits next week

Loebsack will continue his Make It Work tour through the district Monday, visiting with the Mount Pleasant Chamber Alliance to discuss the Community Block Development Grant program. He then will go to Fairfield to meet with local Chamber of Commerce and economic development leaders to discuss how the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s rural development initiatives have benefited the city.