

Oberstar Pushes for President, Republicans to Reach a Deal on FAA Bill

By Kathryn A. Wolfe, CQ Staff

In a broad-ranging “exit interview” with reporters Tuesday, the outgoing House Transportation and Infrastructure chairman said he still thinks an FAA reauthorization can be completed in the lame-duck session and that he has urged the Obama administration to work with Republicans to make it happen.

James L. Oberstar, D-Minn., said he has asked Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and President Obama to take up the matter with the Republican leadership in the House and Senate and reach an agreement to quickly move the bill.

“I’m willing to take whatever the Senate sends us,” said Oberstar, who was defeated in a bid for a 19th term on Election Day. “Well — at least a \$1 increase in PFCs,” he added, referring to the landing fees airports can charge, known as Passenger Facility Charges.

Lawmakers have been trying for months to complete work on a long-term authorization (HR 915, S 1451).

However, several disagreements have stymied final action on the bill, including whether to raise the per-flight cap on the PFCs, which airports can tack onto the price of a ticket to use for capital improvements.

Other disagreements have included House-passed language that would have the effect of making it easier for Fed-Ex ground workers to unionize, putting them on the same labor-law footing as UPS, as well as efforts by Western lawmakers to expand long-distance flights in and out of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

Oberstar said Obama will meet with the new Republican leadership and that the long-delayed FAA reauthorization bill could be a topic for discussion. That meeting, originally scheduled for Thursday, was rescheduled for after Thanksgiving.

“The president’s going to meet with them,” Oberstar said. “I hope he’ll take that matter up. In fact, I expect that he will, and see if there’s an appetite to reach an agreement.”

SURFACE TRANSPORTATION LAW

He said he expects the length of any extension of surface transportation programs, which will expire on Dec. 31 (PL 111-147), to also be a topic for discussion between Obama and Republicans.

Oberstar said he has recommended a one-year extension of the law. Efforts to write a new multi-year highway bill in the current Congress stalled over disagreements about how to pay for new surface transportation spending.

Oberstar and some others have supported raising the gasoline tax, an idea Obama and leading Senate Democrats have staunchly opposed. That disagreement has pushed real debate on the surface transportation reauthorization bill into next year.

Oberstar called the lack of a surface transportation bill a “big hole in the legislative agenda” and a great disappointment.

But he declined to criticize Obama over the issue Tuesday, although he has had plenty of choice words to say about the White House’s lack of focus on transportation policy in the past.

Oberstar said Obama was true to his campaign pledge not to raise taxes.

“I understand what the president is doing, he’s keeping faith with his own campaign commitments,” Oberstar said.

But he couldn’t resist noting that shortly after the Interstate Highway System was created in 1956, Congress had to pass a gas tax increase to help fund the system. It passed on a voice vote.

“You can’t pass a prayer on a voice vote in the House anymore, and certainly not the Senate,” Oberstar said.

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