

## AReCO in the News

### Expansion still faces hurdles in D.C., Springfield

Some opponents have left office or switched sides

By Joseph Ryan Daily Herald Staff Writer  
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SPRINGFIELD - While 2002 was a banner year for O'Hare International Airport expansion opponents, the recent state political shakeup and shift in local attitudes has created perhaps the clearest route yet for the multibillion-dollar project.

The roadblocks looked almost insurmountable last year as Sen. Peter Fitzgerald killed O'Hare legislation in the U.S. Senate, a DuPage County court ordered Chicago to stop buying land near the airport, and the airlines that would help fund the project continued to slide toward bankruptcy.

But this year a new political lineup in Springfield has removed significant clout from opposition groups and cleared the runway for Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley to push an O'Hare expansion deal at the state level if Fitzgerald continues to be a roadblock in Washington, D.C.

"The Democrats control every facet of Illinois state government except the state treasurer's office, so they can snap their fingers and pass anything they wish," said state Sen. Kirk Dillard, a Hinsdale Republican who supports expansion.

November's elections results sent pro-expansion Democrat Rod Blagojevich to the governor's mansion. In addition, Democrats gained control of the Senate, installing Emil Jones Jr. of Chicago where anti-expansion Senate President James "Pate" Philip of Wood Dale had reigned. Chicago Democrat Michael Madigan, also an expansion supporter, remains Illinois House speaker.

With this seemingly clear path before him, Blagojevich said this week he expects to send an O'Hare expansion plan through Springfield since the federal route appears blocked once again. He said he's willing to support a law to remove the governor's power to veto expansion, which would essentially give Daley complete political control over the \$6 billion-plus project.

Two roads

Yet going through Springfield to secure the expansion plan would force Daley to bargain with the rest of the state and convince downstate and South suburban lawmakers to support the plan.

Daley learned this lesson two years ago when he asked lawmakers to approve reconstructing Soldier Field. Legislators quickly added on millions of dollars for projects at minor league parks throughout the state and the initial stadium plan failed. The version that ultimately was approved included a southern Illinois sports authority to try and lure the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team across the state line.

At a time when the state is facing a \$5 billion deficit, rounding up support from lawmakers ambivalent to O'Hare expansion will be challenging, especially since the governor has charged himself with solving the budget crisis without raising taxes.

"There may be a lot of posturing and a lot of 'Hey what do we get in return?'" said state Rep. William B. "Bill" Black, a Danville Republican. "I'm sure some of the central Illinois legislators would want to

know what does that do for the future of Peotone."

Perhaps of particular concern for Daley is the South suburban proponents of a third airport in Peotone, a project the mayor has long fought. With an O'Hare expansion plan floating through Springfield, Peotone-supporting lawmakers, who formed a new voting bloc for better clout, would almost certainly want something in return for their votes.

Many Peotone backers said they fear Blagojevich will reverse his support of Peotone much like former Gov. George Ryan ditched his opposition to O'Hare expansion in a deal with Daley.

Fueling those concerns was Blagojevich's recent appointment of a Daley aide to head the state's transportation department, which oversees Peotone land buying. Furthermore, the governor has said he may stop buying land for the project altogether.

"There is nothing in the new administration that indicates they are going to speed things up rather than slow them down," said Steve Steckler, president of Infrastructure Management Group, which is negotiating a private-public partnership for the creation of a Peotone airport.

A mayoral spokesman said Friday the mayor is "obviously happy" that the governor is considering giving up the runway veto power, but said no decision has been made about moving the approval fight from Washington to Springfield. The mayor is "keeping his options open," the spokesman said.

And Blagojevich said he's not giving up on passing an O'Hare plan in Washington.

By going through Washington, Daley can secure stronger legislation, not only handing him control over the project but also spurring the Federal Aviation Administration for faster approval. A Springfield law couldn't press the FAA.

O'Hare legislation has been introduced in both the U.S. House and Senate this year; however, they have yet to make any significant movements towards passage. Fitzgerald has vowed to kill the proposals again.

But this time around in Washington could be easier, political observers said. While Fitzgerald is unwavering in his opposition, it might be harder for him to single-handedly stop the legislation. A filibuster threat from the Inverness Republican would stifle his own party's legislation in the newly Republican-controlled Senate, creating unwanted intra-party friction.

"I will be as vocal about the reasons it shouldn't happen as I have been to date. Obviously I have a much greater ability to impact the bill in Washington rather than Springfield," Fitzgerald said.

#### Dwindling opposition

Expansion opponents say politics are irrelevant since the plan itself is "fatally flawed." They argue a new, third airport would be more cost-effective and practical.

"It's going to fail under its own weight," Joseph Karaganis, an attorney for the anti-expansion Suburban O'Hare Commission, said of Daley's O'Hare plan.

But the commission recently lost significant influence when the DuPage County Board, led by Republican Chairman Robert Schillerstrom, reversed its stringent opposition to O'Hare expansion,

which would wipe out homes and businesses in communities such as Bensenville.

In addition, Philip lost his Senate president post, and expansion opponent Lee Daniels of Elmhurst stepped down from his position as House Republican leader.

With the political stars aligning in favor of O'Hare expansion, Schillerstrom said the region needed to present a united front. He also feared losing federal cash for a coveted western access highway to the airport, a roadway predicted to reduce current traffic congestion.

Schillerstrom met with Daley before pushing the O'Hare policy flip-flop, but maintains no deal was cut for his endorsement. It was the latest indication that the debate over O'Hare expansion appears to have switched to when and how the airport will grow rather than if it will happen.

So, while many questions are still in the air such as funding and FAA approval, Illinois' political environment appears to have transformed into perhaps the most expansion-friendly landscape since the drive to expand O'Hare began decades ago.

Expansion opponents, meanwhile, say the project may have another decade to wait despite the recent political development.

"This is just the beginning of the fight," said Jack Saporito, executive director of the Alliance of Residents Concerning O'Hare. "There are many environmental and legal hurdles and court battles they need to jump over before the first spade of dirt is ever turned over."

- Daily Herald Staff Writer Shamus Toomey contributed to this report.