

(December 29, 2006) Officials tell FAA backup needed now

State says O'Hare can't wait for radar
Officials tell FAA backup needed now By Jon Hilkevitch

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Installation of a backup radar system at O'Hare International Airport must be speeded up to avoid a repeat of the radar failure this month that delayed hundreds of flights, Illinois officials told the Federal Aviation Administration on Thursday.

Members of the Illinois congressional delegation sent a letter to FAA Administrator Marion Blakey saying O'Hare cannot wait until late 2008, when equipment to back up the airport's primary radar system is scheduled for installation.

"It is astounding that Atlanta and Dallas-Ft. Worth have multiple radars to cover for catastrophic failures on site, but FAA does not believe O'Hare should be given similar consideration," the letter said.

It was signed by U.S. Rep. Jerry Costello (D-Ill.), who is expected to be named chairman of the House Aviation Subcommittee in January; U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.); and U.S. Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-Ill.).

"Without sufficient technology investments, O'Hare will continue to experience delays and congestion, having far-reaching effects on our entire system," the letter said.

FAA officials said they are evaluating the request to move up deployment of the second radar system to provide backup and improve efficiency.

O'Hare's air-traffic controllers were forced to reduce flights Dec. 15 when a defective switch wiped out the airport's radar system. Arrival rates were slashed to about 60 airplanes per hour from the usual 96 planes landing during the breakdown, which lasted several hours.

During the radar failure, FAA officials tapped into a radar system in Tinley Park used primarily for flights at Midway Airport. That radar does not provide full coverage at O'Hare, requiring the reduction in O'Hare flights to maintain safety, officials said.

Failures involving O'Hare's primary radar system, called the Airport Surveillance Radar-Model 9, occur several times a year on average.

The FAA plans to install a second radar system at O'Hare when the first new runway, on the north end of the airfield, is tentatively scheduled to open in November 2008 as part of Chicago's \$15 billion O'Hare expansion. But the expansion is behind schedule and there is no guarantee the new runway will open in 2008, city officials said.

The new system initially will serve as a backup, and later will work in concert with the existing radar system as more new runways are built, officials said.

The FAA said Thursday that it has no plans to speed up deployment of the new radar.

"We are evaluating the request. At this time the FAA has no plans to move from what we are doing at O'Hare in terms of coordinating installation of the new equipment with the construction on the airfield," said FAA spokeswoman Elizabeth Isham Cory.

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