SENATE COMMITTEE APPROVES FY 2012 TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

On September 21, the Senate Committee on Appropriations approved the FY 2012 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies bill (S. 1596). The legislation, which includes funding for the FAA, allocates a total budget authority of $55.3 billion, which is $100 million less than the FY 2011 enacted levels. Of this amount, the Senate recommended $15.9 billion for the FAA, which is $632 million more than the administration's request and $9.1 million more than the funding provided in FY 2011. The amount requested is approximately $3.3 billion more than the amount included in the House Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Subcommittee bill (see Legislative Update, September 16, 2011).

The Senate bill recommends a total of $9.7 billion for FAA operations, which is equal to the amount requested by the House subcommittee and approximately $187 million less than the budget request and $122 million more than the FY 2011 enacted level. Within the operations budget, $5 billion will be derived from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund. The operations account includes $7.6 billion for the Air Traffic Organization (ATO) and $1.3 billion for aviation safety activities. These amounts are equal to the FY 2011 levels and those requested by the House subcommittee.

Within the report accompanying the legislation, the committee emphasized its continuing commitment to ensuring adequate inspector staffing at the FAA. "Protecting the safety of our air transportation system is the fundamental mission of the agency, and these inspectors form the backbone of that effort," stated the report. As such, the committee recommendation includes an increase of $7 million for an additional 60 positions in Flight Standards and another $950,000 for an increase of 11 positions in Aircraft Certification. PASS has consistently brought attention to this issue over the years and, while the increase suggested by the committee is appreciated, it is lower than the administration's request of $10.5 million for an additional 90 Flight Standards positions and $1.4 million for another 16 Aircraft Certification positions. The committee did not prohibit the FAA from using these funds for other purposes, but identified the staff increases as "congressional items of interest" and required the FAA to submit to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees a request for approval prior to redirecting any of these funds.

For facilities and equipment, the Senate bill includes $2.6 billion, which is less than the FY 2011 level and the administration's and House subcommittee's request for FY 2012. The committee report identified major Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) initiatives, including the Automatic Dependent Surveillance–Broadcast (ADS-B) program and the En Route Automation Modernization (ERAM) program. However, while the committee recognized these programs and others as priorities, it cautioned that this was not enough to protect the NextGen program, stating that "the Committee needs to see more from the FAA itself." For research, engineering and development, the Senate bill recommends $157 million, which is $13 million less than FY 2011 levels, $18 million less than the House subcommittee request and $33 million less than the president's request.

In addition, the Senate bill included language to provide back pay to employees who were furloughed during the two-week partial shutdown of the agency. PASS worked to ensure inclusion of this language in the legislation. However, it was determined last week that legislation was not necessary in order to allow the agency to grant back pay to the nearly 4,000 workers impacted by the shutdown. "A preventable failure of Congress resulting in significant hardship for thousands of FAA employees has
finally been made right,” said Rep. Frank LoBiondo (R-N.J.), who worked to secure back pay for employees by introducing legislation in the House.

Despite the work being done on the appropriations bills within the separate houses, Congress has yet to complete work on any bill. As such, Congress approved another continuing resolution (H.R. 2608) to keep the federal government funded through November 18. The resolution sets discretionary spending levels for the early parts of FY 201 according to the $1.043 trillion level set in the debt limit law. The legislation includes $2.65 billion in disaster aid. The continuing resolution only gives lawmakers a few weeks to complete work on FY 2012 appropriations and it is expected that all 12 annual spending bills will be combined in an omnibus spending package.

SUPER COMMITTEE EYES FEDERAL EMPLOYEE COMPENSATION, BENEFITS, STAFFING

PASS Grassroots Action Needed

As a result of current efforts to reduce the budget deficit, the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction was established in order to find trillions of dollars in cuts. The 12-member “super committee” is expected to compile its recommendations for budget cuts into legislation in early November and vote on the measure by November 23. Unfortunately, the committee is considering reductions to federal employee health/retirement benefits and arbitrary cuts to the federal employee workforce in order to lower the debt. PASS has joined with other labor organizations in a major movement to send a clear message to Congress that it cannot target federal employees in its deficit-reduction discussions.

As PASS members are well aware, federal employees have already been forced to accept a two-year pay freeze that will result in $60 billion in savings over the next 10 years. However, since the pay freeze was issued prior to the budget negotiations, federal employees are at the risk of being targeted yet again. In addition, there are proposals circulating that would decrease federal employee health and retirement benefits, cut the federal employee workforce, and force federal employees to take a two-week furlough in FY 2012. In a letter to the president, PASS and other members of the Federal-Postal Coalition reminded him that “more than anyone, our nation’s civil servants understand the constraints of the federal budget. They are already doing their part to lower government costs.” The coalition urged Obama to reject any further cuts to the compensation of federal employees and retirees.

In addition, the Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO (TTD) Executive Committee, of which PASS is a member, approved a resolution on Thursday opposing attacks on federal employees. The resolution called for Congress to “end the unprecedented attacks on the rights, jobs, wages and retirement security of federal employees including thousands who directly support and work in our transportation system.” The resolution discourages cutting federal employee staffing or compensation “under the guise of deficit reduction.” “It is time for the 112th Congress to end the demonization of federal workers who perform critically important work for the American people such as ensuring that Americans enjoy the safest transportation system in the world,” concluded the resolution. “Making scapegoats of these workers will not fix the economy, put people to work or improve the vital government services delivered daily by the federal workforce.”

ACTION ITEM: As part of the effort to prevent further impact on the federal employee workforce, PASS is asking all PASS members to contact their members of Congress on this important issue. PASS launched a grassroots advocacy campaign this week and all members should have received an email allowing them to send letters to their representative and senators. In addition, PASS has created a special section of its website aimed at helping members get information and take action to stop lawmakers from targeting federal employees in their deficit-reduction talks. Please visit www.passnational.org/MembersOnly/deficit_reduction_fed_employee.html today to find out more details.