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Stalemate breaks; deal reached for 6th runway at O'Hare



Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel addresses the crowd last October minutes before O'Hare International Airport's newest parallel runway, 10-R/28-L, opened.

Bob Chwedyk | Staff Photographer



Marni Pyke

After years of stalemate, Chicago has reached an agreement with airlines on building a sixth parallel runway at O'Hare International Airport but the announcement of the deal contains no mention of a planned runway extension or western terminal.

Building the airport's last parallel runway handling east-west traffic will cost \$648.5 million and is part of a \$1.3 billion package that includes a new de-icing facility and new taxiways connecting the north and south airfields, officials announced Saturday.

But the original O'Hare modernization plan approved by the Federal Aviation Administration also involved extending Runway 9-Right/27-Left, on the north airfield. The hope was that it and the sixth runway, 9-Center/27-Center, also on the north side, would balance out the din of jets roaring over neighborhoods.

The runway will be completed in 2020, which is "great news," Bensenville Mayor Frank Soto said. "It gives us more options for a (flight) rotation program. It gives us more relief."

While the extension was not mentioned in the city's announcement, "it's still part of the plans," airport spokesman Owen Kilmer said.

Those projects and another runway on O'Hare's southern tip (10-Right/28-Left) should have wrapped up in 2013, but a dispute about costs between Chicago and United Airlines and American Airlines, who have say over financing, threw plans into limbo.

The south runway was completed in 2013 and proved the tipping point for the airport to shift from diagonal runways to a parallel east-west arrival and departure system that's raising a ruckus over noise with thousands of affected residents, although the city has stressed the change increases safety.

Suburbs such as Bensenville have warned that without the runway extension, the south airfield -- home to two of the longest runways -- will continue to bear the brunt of larger, noisier jets.

Soto said Bensenville will continue to push for full build out of the airport, which will provide more comprehensive noise relief.

O'Hare spokesman Kilmer said the city would "continue to pursue infrastructure projects to maintain and improve the airfield, but the immediate focus will be on what is best for the city and the passengers who rely on O'Hare on a daily basis.

"(Runway) 9-Center unlocks potential on the airfield for even further development."

The new runway will be O'Hare's second longest one at 11,245 feet.

The agreement involved American and United Airlines and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Chicago officials announced that the city is planning to carry out sound insulation for "eligible homes and schools" before the runway opens but gave no further details.

The new de-icing facility and taxiways are both intended to get planes to gates faster. Mayor Rahm Emanuel said the city intends to add more gates, improve the existing terminals and build another hotel on the airfield. No information was given on where the extra gates will go.

The city's announcement Saturday included the promise that it would create "a mode of western access to O'Hare," but gave no specifics.

Chicago and the Illinois Tollway are at odds over the city's request for \$190 million for a 300 foot strip of land on the west side of O'Hare for a bypass around the airport linking the extension of the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway with the Tri-State Tollway to the south and Jane Addams Tollway to the north.

It's part of a long desired plan by DuPage County to have western access into O'Hare with a terminal and a people mover to take travelers to the rest of the airport.

Meanwhile, Colleen Mulcrone of the Fair Allocation for Runways group (FAIR), which wants the city to keep two diagonal runways in play, said the push for the parallel system negates a meeting last week with Emanuel who "is more concerned about contracts and money than communities and people.

"Eliminating the diagonal runways concentrates the visual, noise, and air pollution, and all the attendant negative health effects, in that one narrow corridor," she said.

And while Itasca Mayor Jeff Pruyn welcomed the runway, saying his village is getting "slammed" with noise, he also noted the city is "building it to increase capacity, they're not building a runway to shift flights."

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