

Lawmakers put airport into hands of an authority

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Legislation putting the operation of Detroit Metropolitan Airport under the control of a seven-member authority cleared its biggest hurdle Wednesday in the state House. Representatives voted 76-31 on adoption.

Senators quickly followed suit, voting 28-8 in favor, and sent the bill to the governor.

Gov. John Engler's press secretary Susan Shafer said he is expected to sign the bill in the next few weeks and quickly move to name his appointees.

Shafer said none of the amendments made in the Legislature were significant enough for him to withdraw his support.

In fact, the measure was little changed from the deal originally struck between Engler and Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara to create the authority.

Key components were the make-up of the authority — four appointees to be named by the Wayne executive, two by the governor and one by the Wayne County Board of Commissioners — and immediate effect, allowing Engler and McNamara to name the members themselves.

Supporters — Republicans and outstate Democrats — say the measure will go a long way toward solving financial problems at the airport, such as no-bid contracts and cost overruns, uncovered in two years of legislative hearings and reviews by the state Auditor General.

"This bill lessens the chance of cronyism and nepotism when it comes to airport operations and puts sharper teeth in other areas of regulations and internal review," said Rep. Jim Keefe (R-Grandville), chair of the House Airport Review Subcommittee.

Wayne County Democrats were disappointed by the rejection of amendments they offered to give more seats to the county commission and to change the terms to the appointees to allow the next governor and executive to name authority members.

"I can't tell you what a joke I think this legislation is," Rep. Gloria Schermesser (D-Lincoln Park) said. Rather than making the airport more accountable, she said it would insulate airport officials from the voting public. "It will be like giving the keys to the inmates."

Rep. Glenn Anderson (D-Westland) had similar reservations.

"If the airport has been so mishandled," Anderson said, "why are we giving the same person who has been running it all those appointments ... The county commission has been pushed out. I have a basic problem usurping the

authority of an elected body."

Amendments

Several amendments were made to the bill, the most significant offered by Rep. Buzz Thomas (D-Detroit). That amendment requires the authority to honor union contracts with airport workers. It bars lay-offs at the airport as well as reductions in pay or benefits for workers for one year.

"At the end of the day, I voted no," Thomas said. "It would not have been the bill that I would

have written, but given the reality that this was happening, I think we did the best we could for making changes to the proposal and securing worker protections in particular."

Rep. Bruce Patterson (R-Canton) said he was pleased overall with the bill.

He's been critical of operations at the airport for years, ever since he was a county commissioner. Even though the House, in voting, only accepted two of Patterson's 10 proposed amendments, he said the

bill should address a number of concerns he has had about airport operations and finances.

Wayne County auditor Brendan Dunleavy was not pleased with the outcome. He said the authority will have inadequate oversight, because the authority board will meet just four times per year. Independent auditors, provided for under the bill, will report directly to the airport chief executive officer. Lawmakers specifically rejected a proposal to increase the county auditor's ability to review air-

port finances and operations, but Dunleavy said he may still have the ability to audit the airport.

"It's a Wayne County authority, and the law says the airport is a Wayne County asset," he explained.

He said he'll look into the legality of his office running audits on the airport anyway, a question that may get tested in court eventually if the governor or executive attempts to block him.

Wayne County commissioners are also considering testing the

authority legislation in court, according to Wayne County Democratic lawmakers.

Senate Bill 690 passed 76-31, but the following vote on immediate effect saw a 76-29 tally.

Reps. Bruce Patterson (R-Canton), Andrew Raczkowski (R-Farmington Hills), John Stewart (R-Plymouth) and Laura Toy (R-Livonia) voted yes. Reps. Glenn Anderson (D-Westland), Bob Brown (D-Dearborn Heights) and Jim Plakas (D-Garden City) voted no.



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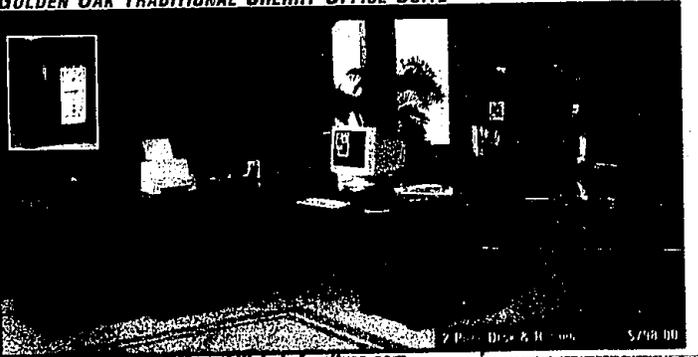
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Progress

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the right bags or taken someone else's. Also, there are no places to sit in the luggage pick-up area, which is especially uncomfortable for the elderly and infirm.

We finally left the airport at 7:10 p.m. for a flight with a 4:05 p.m. arrival time. Obviously, the new terminal, fine as it is, is still a work in progress.

Hugh Gallagher is managing editor of The Observer Newspapers.

Earrings

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While the \$2.1 million fountain might be pretty and wonderful, it is one of the few fountains where they discourage coin tossing. The fountain has been shut down a couple of times because coins jam the system.

The gate areas don't have much more seating than the Davey Terminal, nor are more comfortable, the advantage comes from the area around the gate. Simply, there is more room around the gate to stand, and more room means less congestion.

The shops are nice at the airport, but face it. The vast majority of the shops, such as the Motown, General Motors or Henry Ford Museum are going to be used by people who A) want a souvenir or B) want to buy one for someone else. They aren't must-visit places.

The bottom line is that the Midfield Terminal is an impressive facility. It's the facility's major facility that needs to get it act together, PDQ. Otherwise it's like putting earrings on a pig.

Paul Beaudry is a paginator for The Observer Newspapers.

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