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Valley airports on radar for growth, FAA funding, Mitchell says

Paul Giblin, Tribune

The Valley's airports should be on the radar for federal funding as the demand for air service increases in coming years, Rep. Harry Mitchell said.

Mitchell, D-Ariz., and Rep. Jerry Costello, D-Ill., met with regional airport officials and toured Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport and Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport on Monday.

Costello serves as head of the Aviation Subcommittee in the House.

Mitchell noted that Federal Aviation Administration officials believe that air capacity throughout the country will need to be increased dramatically to handle an estimated 1 billion passengers by 2015. About 800 million people traveled by air in 2007.

Those growing pains could be even more acute in the Valley, because the projected growth rate here is twice the national average, he said.

"The FAA has already warned that Phoenix already is one of the eight metropolitan areas that will need significantly more capacity by 2025," Mitchell said.

Several large-scale improvements already are being planned for Sky Harbor, which is the nation's eighth busiest airport. Among them:

New concourses, new terminals and a shuttle system that will move people between parking lots, terminals and rental car facilities.

But that won't be enough, Mitchell said.

"The best long-term solution will require development of Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport," he said.

The commercial airport already has good freeway access and is located near Pinal County, the fastest growing county in the nation, he said.

Additional capacity at the airports will relieve congestion and spur the local economy, he said.

The challenge for both local and federal aviation officials will be to meet the expected increase for air service, Costello said.

"The only way that you're going to be able to meet the demands of the future is to not only modernize the system, but you have to increase the capacity. And that's what has to be done here in Phoenix and that's what we need to do throughout the area," he said.

Gateway will have to be developed so that the Valley will have multiple commercial airports, similar to the Chicago, Los Angeles and Dallas markets, he said.

Mitchell and Costello did not offer specifics about how much funding the federal government will allocate to the Valley's airports, however, the House passed a bill that includes \$15 billion to be used on airports nationwide.

Details concerning the Valley's share could emerge as the bill moves through the Senate, Costello said.

Phoenix assistant aviation director Carl Newman said any new runway construction in the Valley is certain to go to Gateway rather than Sky Harbor.

By 2028, Gateway is expected to have 100 flights a day. In comparison, Sky Harbor currently has 1,486 daily arrivals and departures.