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Flying Blind in Chicago

By Bob Herbert
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You can get a glimpse of what's wrong with this country by taking a ride through a huge tract of open land south of Chicago. Some of the land is used for growing corn or soybeans. Some is pasture land.

The area is just south of several struggling suburban municipalities, which in turn are just south of the city's economically hard hit South Side. If ever there was a region desperate for jobs and economic development, this is it.

So you would think that a project that would bring thousands of new jobs and long-term economic revitalization to the region would be a no-brainer.

It has long been known that a third airport is needed in the Chicago metropolitan area. Among major airports, Chicago's O'Hare had the worst on-time departure rate in the nation last year. Midway Airport, already operating at capacity, has short runways and cannot significantly expand because of a lack of additional space.

Flying in and out of Chicago is often a nightmare. Since the mid-1980s, numerous studies by the Federal Aviation Administration have pointed to the need for a third airport.

Incredibly, the plans and the funding for a proposed new airport in the open spaces just below the southern Chicago suburbs, to be called the Abraham Lincoln National Airport, are ready and waiting to be implemented. The plan is innovative, a public-private partnership that would generate more than 1,000 construction jobs and 15,000 permanent jobs when the airport opened.

The airport's sponsors estimate that it would generate billions of dollars of economic activity — economic growth that is desperately needed in the adjacent suburban towns and the city's South Side. The state has already purchased half of the acreage needed for the project.

So what's the hang-up? Why hasn't the project, which has been in the works since the mid-90s, gone forward?

Simply stated, the politicians can't get their act together.

The airport proposal has long been the primary focus of Representative Jesse Jackson Jr., a Chicago Democrat. He has spent years mastering its complexities, lining up financing that would keep taxpayer contributions to a minimum and fending off interests that do not want the competition that a third airport would bring, or who would like to carve out a corrupt stake in the project.

The airport would be financed and built by two firms with vast airport experience: LCOR, which owns and operates International Terminal 4 at Kennedy Airport in New York, and SNC-Lavalin, which has financed and operates airports in Europe, Canada, South America and elsewhere.

The Chicago Tribune, one of a number of papers that has thrown editorial support behind Mr. Jackson's efforts, has written: "It's a creative and detailed proposal that holds the best hope for the creation and expansion of a south suburban airport."

Barack Obama came out publicly in favor of the proposal back in 2004 when he was an Illinois state senator. In a guest editorial in The Chicago Sun-Times, he noted that there was still a need to expand O'Hare and that the airlines and the federal government would pay most of the cost of that expansion.

But even with an expansion of O'Hare, he wrote, the volume of traffic in the region was so heavy that a third airport was needed. Mr. Jackson, he said, had assembled private investors who were willing to "put up their capital" for it.

"State government's role in the project," said Mr. Obama, "would be limited to providing infrastructure improvements, such as roads, transit and sewers, which it routinely provides to other development projects around the state."

There are many advantages to this project, in addition to the private funding. The airport would be specifically designed to serve low-cost carriers that cannot afford to build and operate their own terminals. They would arrive and depart at "common-use" gates that are far more economical.

Another feature of the airport design is that it is "market driven," meaning that it would be relatively small when it opened and could easily be expanded as demand increased.

The major airlines serving Chicago are not interested in seeing low-cost competition flying in and out of a spanking new airport, especially one with enormous growth potential. And many of the big-time politicians in and around Chicago are upset at the very thought of an airport being built in which they would be unable to control the jobs and the contracts. Airports tend to be monstrous patronage mills. This one would not be.

The U.S. is in a world-class recession, hemorrhaging jobs and spending trillions of dollars trying to extricate itself from the mess. That this ready-to-go project is still sitting on the table, still waiting for state government approval after several long years have already been wasted, is plain nuts.