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Stifling an Opportunity

By Bob Herbert
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I asked Jesse Jackson Jr., a Democratic congressman whose district includes much of the South Side of Chicago, why he had become so committed to the creation of a third Chicago-area airport several miles south of his district.

The short answer was jobs. He noted that the O'Hare airport had opened to commercial traffic more than a half-century ago and was still growing.

"An airport is a very different public-works project than a bridge or a road," he said. "The jobs that come with the development of an airport range from construction to taxicab drivers, to the hotel and motel industry, to Avis and Hertz, which buy cars by the fleet, to Federal Express and DHL, and all those others who staff and manage the airport. Corporate headquarters frequently locate near an airport.

"In terms of employment, it's the gift that keeps on giving."

When Mr. Jackson first took his seat in Congress in the mid-1990s, he formed a friendship with Henry Hyde, a Republican congressman whose district included O'Hare, which is on Chicago's northwest side. "I went on a tour of his district," said Mr. Jackson, "and you could see every conceivable industry in the world out there. The airport was an economic engine, a magnet."

He said that Mr. Hyde, who died in 2007, would always be looking for tax cuts for his constituents on the North Side and the northwest suburbs, while the elected representatives from the South Side and its suburbs were often in search of additional safety-net resources — more unemployment compensation, for example, or food stamps.

"I was looking for something that would change that dynamic," Mr. Jackson said. "There was no economic magnet comparable to O'Hare bringing jobs to the people of the South Side."

The current recession has only worsened the economic plight of the South Side and the nearby suburbs, which also have been struggling for years. The desire for a generator of jobs is greater than ever.

It has long been understood that a third airport was needed in the Chicago metropolitan area. Midway Airport, which is plagued by short runways, and O'Hare, which is

undergoing yet another expansion, seem always to be straining to meet demand. Flying in and out of Chicago can be hellish for travelers.

The Federal Aviation Administration said last year that Chicago would need a new airport — or a vast expansion of one of the existing airports (beyond the current expansion at O'Hare) — to meet the demand of the next few decades.

From the moment he set foot in Congress, Mr. Jackson has been trying to bring about the construction of an airport near the South Side and the South Chicago suburbs that would, in one swoop, so to speak, expand the region's air traffic capacity and create thousands of desperately needed jobs.

It is much, much easier said than done.

Mr. Jackson is the driving force behind the Abraham Lincoln National Airport Commission, a public-private partnership that is ready and eager to build an innovative new airport in the open spaces just south of the suburbs. The state already has purchased half of the land for the project, which the sponsors say will yield 1,000 construction jobs and 15,000 permanent jobs when the airport opens.

The project would be financed and built by two firms that normally compete with one another: LCOR, which owns and operates International Terminal 4 at Kennedy Airport in New York, and SNC-Lavalin, which has financed and operates airports in many parts of the world, including Europe and Canada.

The airport would serve low-cost carriers using economical "common-use" gates and has been creatively designed to be able to start small and to grow easily as demand expanded.

No one that I've spoken with has found fault with the plan or its financing, which relies primarily on private capital. But there has been a palpable coolness to the project by some of the major political players in Chicago and in the state capital of Springfield. They have created a long-term behind-the-scenes bottleneck for the project.

Airports are generally patronage goldmines for well-situated officeholders. But this one would be different. The politicians would not control the jobs and the contracts. The commission's board would be appointed by municipalities from the surrounding counties and by the governor. But the airport would be run by its private investors, with the board providing oversight to keep the airport's operations transparent.

The goal from the beginning has been to keep the proposed airport out of the clutches of Chicago's notorious "pay-to-play" tradition.

That is the most likely reason that this project, with its potential to unleash so many jobs, has taken so long to get off the ground.