



Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission

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Bills to Update Airports and Attract More Engineers Win Approval from Senate

OKLAHOMA CITY – Two bills relating to aviation passed the Senate floor rather easily Tuesday. One measure concerned the state’s air transportation system, while the other focused on the state’s flourishing aerospace industry.

Senators overwhelmingly approved House Bill 2082, the Airport Modernization Bill, by a 43-0 vote. The bill now heads to conference committee where legislators will decide how much the program will be funded next fiscal year.

If fully funded, HB 2082 would provide a one-time, \$40 million appropriation to the Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission that would be used to fund the Airport Modernization Program. Through the program, Oklahoma’s 49 regional business airports will be eligible for grants for specific projects, including the construction or renovation of terminals and hangars primarily used for general aviation. Funding may also cover the costs associated with providing adequate navigational aids that will allow aircraft to land safely, even in bad weather.

“These airports are gateways to the world for communities and help attract and keep the businesses that provide a significant number of jobs to Oklahoma,” Bird said.

“Legislators have a very tough job. They have a duty to make sure our children receive a quality education, our roads and bridges are safe, our prisons are adequately funded and Oklahomans with special needs are taken care of,” Bird added. “This bill is about keeping our young Oklahomans who we educate here, working and living in Oklahoma. The companies that provide an astounding number of jobs in Oklahoma are using our airways and airports to do business. Today, business comes calling in a plane, not a bus.”

Bird said that without the support of key legislators, including the bill’s principal authors, Rep. Mike Jackson, R-Enid, and Sen. David Myers, R- Ponca City, HB 2082 would not have passed the House and Senate. He also cited the many business and community leaders who helped during the grass roots effort to get the bill heard and eventually passed.

“We owe a great deal of gratitude to all of these individuals who see the value of our regional airports and what they mean to our communities and state. It’s been a lot of hard work to get to this point, but it’s been well worth it,” Bird said.

Also on Tuesday, HB 2085 by Jackson and Sen. Mike Mazzei, R-Tulsa, won Senate approval by a vote of 44-2. Often referred to as the Engineer Work Force Bill, HB 2085 provides tax credits of up to 30 percent each year for five years to Oklahoma aerospace companies that hire engineering graduates, as well as tax

credits of no more than \$5,000 per year for five years for engineering graduates who choose to work for Oklahoma aerospace companies.

One provision that was recently removed from the bill would have provided employment incentive payments, or tuition rebates, to engineering graduates who stay in Oklahoma and work in aerospace for five years. Industry officials have indicated that they are still in discussions with legislators to restore that particular provision.

“The aerospace industry in the U.S. is one that currently enjoys a \$40 billion trade surplus in the world. Not many other U.S. industries can make this claim,” Bird said. “Much of that success can be traced to talented and bright engineers who are the cutting edge for new technology and innovations in the aerospace industry. But there are fewer of these engineers in the pipeline than in years past—a troubling reality for our nation and especially for aerospace companies right here in Oklahoma.”

Bird noted that China is producing nearly 600,000 engineers annually and India about 350,000 engineers, while the U.S. produces approximately 70,000 engineers. Those comparisons don’t bode well for the burgeoning aerospace industry in the U.S. In Oklahoma alone, aerospace companies such as American Airlines, Boeing, Nordam and Spirit AeroSystems, as well as Tinker Air Force Base, the state’s largest employer, need more engineers to keep up with demand. HB 2085 could go a long way in helping these and other Oklahoma aerospace companies compete, Bird said.

“I believe that, if approved, HB 2085 will incentivize more Oklahoma engineering graduates to stay and work in Oklahoma. It would also encourage young people to seek careers in engineering and science,” Bird said.

Oklahoma’s aviation and aerospace industry is the state’s largest employer, providing nearly 150,000 jobs across the state and producing an annual economic output of more than \$12 billion. According to the most recent studies, one in 10 Oklahomans derives his or her income from aviation. The average salary for an aerospace worker in Oklahoma is more than \$54,000, compared to an average of about \$29,000 for all Oklahoman workers.

The Commission’s mission is to encourage, foster and assist in the development of aeronautics in Oklahoma and to encourage the establishment and maintenance of airports. This includes the preservation and improvement of the state’s 114 public airports in communities throughout the state, which make up the State Airport System.