

Insurance Times: Hopes high for aviation security compromise
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WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Dennis Hastert urged Congress to get an aviation security bill to President Bush by Thanksgiving, a goal that will require House and Senate negotiators to overcome formidable differences. The House narrowly rejected a Senate-passed bill and approved its own package of measures to make airports and airplanes safer. As a result, the two sides must negotiate a compromise before the legislation can go to the president. The two bills have many areas in common — including fortifying cockpit doors, increasing air marshals and expanding check-in baggage inspections — but take separate paths on how to tighten screening procedures. The Senate voted to make all screeners federal employees equivalent to Customs officials, while the House opted for federal controls over screening operations that would mainly remain in private hands.

Seven weeks after the attacks in New York and Washington, Congress was under pressure to move quickly to strike a deal. "It will say to the American people that we are doing everything we possibly can to recover from the aftermath of Sept. 11," Bush said.

But there was also a recognition that House-Senate conferences can be the death of legislation. "My greatest fear is that if it goes to a conference, it never comes out," House Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri said Thursday. Bush could institute some measures to improve security through executive orders if Congress fails to act, but he says he wants the more comprehensive authority from legislation.

Hastert said he hoped to get a bill to the president by Thanksgiving, "to give holiday travelers the peace of mind that we have taken every step necessary to make air travel safer."

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., one of the chief authors of the House bill, said he didn't think the two sides were too far apart. But signs that the going will be tough were already evident. Hastert made clear he felt the House bill was superior in several key aspects and pointed out that it was preferred by both the president and the attorney general.

Sen. McCain

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a top advocate for the Senate bill, said the House version was significantly weaker and "I expect my Senate colleagues to fight to restore these important security measures and give the American public the same level of safety that members of Congress insist on for themselves."

In addition to the issue of whether screeners should be federally employed or just federally supervised, the bills differ on what agency would have jurisdiction over aviation security. The Senate, stressing that security is a law enforcement function, would put it in the Justice Department; the House would create a new agency in the Transportation Department to oversee all transportation security.

The Senate is also certain to resist late additions House Republicans made to their bill, partly to win over undecided lawmakers. The most important, aimed at pleasing New York Republicans, extended liability protections already given to the airlines involved in the Sept. 11 hijackings and crashes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The House language would include aviation manufacturers, office building owners and others in those protections.

"We would never agree," McCain said, to provisions that "have nothing to do with airport security, everything to do with campaign contributions."