

Why Eastern Iowa airports want to raise the pilot retirement age

Citing safety, pilot unions, Transportation Secretary opposed



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An aircraft is parked April 27 at the end of a jetway of the concourse at The Eastern Iowa Airport in southwest Cedar Rapids. An airport improvement project, entering its final phase, will increase the width of the concourse and increase the number of gates. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

CEDAR RAPIDS — While not a silver bullet, legislation to increase the retirement age for commercial pilots will incrementally help as airlines contend with labor shortages that have caused them to trim flight schedules and drop regional service, Eastern Iowa airport officials say.

Iowa U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley joined a group of fellow Republican senators Monday to introduce a bill that would raise the mandatory commercial pilot retirement age to 67 from 65 in a bid to address a pilot shortage that has fueled flight cuts.

“Long delays and cancellations have become all too common in airports across the country, including in Iowa,” Grassley said in a statement. “... By allowing healthy pilots to extend their careers if they choose, our proposal is one step we can take to ensure Iowans have better access to commercial air service, quickly alleviate airport congestion and get Americans to their destinations in a timely manner.”

Pilot unions and U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg have pushed back on the idea of raising the mandatory retirement age over safety concerns. The [Air Line Pilots Association](#), in a news release, said it is “strongly opposes” the proposed legislation, “as there is no reason to change the retirement age and doing so would only increase costs for airlines and introduce unnecessary risks to passengers and crew alike.”

Grassley and Eastern Iowa airport officials say pilots would continue to be held to high standards to ensure passenger safety.

Pilots over age 65 would have to maintain a first-class medical certification, which must be renewed every six months under the bill, to demonstrate they are fit to fly. The proposed legislation would not change any other pilot requirements.

Grassley noted that in 2007 the mandatory pilot retirement age was raised from 60 to 65 after medical reports concluded age had an “insignificant impact” on performance in the cockpit.

With an aging pilot population and heavy use of early retirement packages during the COVID-19 pandemic, one recent study projects North America will be short 12,000 pilots by 2023. Meanwhile, nearly 14,000 licensed pilots in the nation will reach the mandatory retirement age over the next five years and be forced to retire.

Under the proposed legislation, about 5,000 pilots would be able to continue flying over the next two years, The Eastern Iowa Airport Director Marty Lenss said.

“Raising the mandatory retirement age by two years certainly is not a silver bullet solution, but it incrementally will help,” Lenss said. “That prevents additional aircraft from being parked and no longer operating and serving communities.”

The [Regional Airline Association](#), which supports the Grassley-backed bill, says the pilot shortage has resulted in approximately 500 aircraft being grounded and air service curtailed to hundreds of communities. The association represents 43 percent of scheduled passenger flights in the United States.

Since 2019, more than 300 U.S. airports — or 71 percent — have lost flights, despite rising passenger demand, according to the association and a [coalition of aviation stakeholders](#).

Nine airports nationwide have lost all scheduled commercial air service.

“Most of those communities are small markets, and Dubuque is a prime example,” Lenss said.

American Airlines plans to drop service at Dubuque Regional Airport in September, the fourth city the carrier has cut service to amid the ongoing pilot shortage.

American Airlines is the only commercial carrier to fly to Dubuque. Its loss would leave the metropolitan area of about 99,000 people without commercial air service.

“Raising the pilot retirement age will provide medically-fit crew the option to continue flying and help fill the shortage,” said Dubuque Regional Airport Director Todd Dalsing, who also serves as president of the Iowa Public Airport Association. “Without solutions to the pilot shortage problem, regional airports like DBQ and others across the nation will continue to see reductions and loss of service.”

[Buttigieg told Fox News](#) earlier this month: “I’m much more interested in raising the bar on things like compensation and job quality than lowering the bar on something like safety.”

American Airlines and other carriers, though, have boosted pay for regional pilots and invested money in student pilots to help them through schooling, yet shortages still persist, Lenss said.

Instead, he said what’s needed is legislation to ease the financial and time-consuming burden to train prospective pilots.

Lenss said it can cost an average of nearly \$250,000 for a pilot to build up the required hours to fly. He said it’s long past time for the country to rethink its 1,500-hour pilot training rule and “open up pathways” for federal loan forgiveness programs for flight instruction, similar to that of medical school graduates.

Lenss noted no other country in the world requires incoming pilots to attain a similar number of flight hours.

While Cedar Rapids has been more fortunate than most — expanding to 17 non-stop cities from 15 in 2019 — the airport has seen fewer departures. Carriers have replaced smaller regional jets with larger, mainline aircraft, but have fewer frequent flights.

“Three 70-seat aircraft have been replaced for one 170-seat Airbus,” Lenss said, for a net reduction in seats and departures, which makes the airport less convenient for travelers.

“Air service impacts communities’ ability to attract and retain workforce and grow jobs,” Lenss said. “We absolutely have to have the conversation to rectify the pilot shortage issue or there’s going to be more communities that face the prospect of the loss of air service ... until Congress steps up and makes some hard decisions.”

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