

Airport could get more federal funds



A transportation funding proposal by U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., would propel greater federal assistance on local airport improvement projects.

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Among numerous measures in her 2015 federal transportation and housing bill, Murray has included a provision that would increase the federal investment for infrastructure projects funded through the Airport Improvement Program at the Walla Walla Regional Airport.

Under the current program for Airport Improvement projects, the federal government pays 90 percent, and the airport supplies 10 percent. Under Murray's provision, the airport would be eligible to receive a greater percentage of federal investment because it serves communities in both Washington and Oregon, which benefits from the same federal investment rate, 93.75 percent, as Idaho.

The proposal in the Murray-penned bill would be for Walla Walla to receive the average between Walla Walla's rate and Idaho's, which would put it at 91.875 percent.

For every \$1 million of total project cost, the local share would decrease from \$1 million to \$81,250, officials said. The change would be permanent, officials said.

Port of Walla Walla Executive Director Jim Kuntz said the change would be a welcome one. The AIP is tapped for major projects at the airport. The most recent has been aviation ramp improvements.

Murray, chair of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, received bipartisan support in the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Subcommittee on her 2015 federal transportation and housing bill earlier this week.

The bill was to be considered today by the full Appropriations Committee.

The proposal was made possible, according to an announcement, by a landmark budget deal Murray reached last December with U.S. House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, R-Wis.

Other components of the bill include rail safety policies, funding for a new safety institute for short-line railroads; safety measures for bicycles and pedestrians; and planning support for states for global warming impacts on infrastructure. It features \$5 million for the Federal Aviation Administration Center of Excellence in Alternative Jet Fuels and Environment, co-led by Washington State University.

The bill also includes changes to the Rental Assistance Demonstration, which would have benefits for the local housing authority.

Walla Walla Regional Airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund said if approved, the airport would realize immediate savings in 2015 on the next major project on the horizon: design and construction of the taxiway. The project cost is estimated at about \$7.5 million. The airport's share of that under the current division of payment would be about \$760,000. But if Murray's proposal succeeds, the airport's share would be reduced to about \$617,000.

"The reduction in the percentage would save more than \$142,000, which is real money," Skoglund said. "Every little bit helps."

In terms of scale in the budget, the airport's share of the cost of that one project would eat up the vast majority of its capital projects budget. Of the airport's roughly \$4 million 2014 budget, about \$858,000 of it is delegated for capital projects, Skoglund said. Such projects include road maintenance, roof repairs and replacements, maintenance on shelter hangar doors, maintenance of the aviation ramp and more.

Skoglund said spreading major projects out over multiple years has helped to cut costs back over time. For instance, on the taxiway project, officials plan to budget funds for design work in 2015. Construction wouldn't begin until 2016.

What's also helped — at least in the case of ramp rehabilitation — has been \$95,000 in financial assistance from a state grant through the Washington State Department of Aviation.