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Region's congressional delegation to rest of Congress: Leave National Airport alone

By [Lori Aratani](#) April 13

It's FAA reauthorization season again. Officially, this is about passing legislation to keep the Federal Aviation Administration operating, but seasoned veterans know it's also an opportunity for members to push their "special" aviation-related priorities.

A favorite of out-of-town lawmakers is finding new ways to get around the slot and perimeter rules that have long governed the number of flights and how far those flights can travel to and from Reagan National Airport. Yes, we know there are two other airports in the Washington region, Dulles International and Baltimore-Washington International Marshall, but neither is as close to Capitol Hill as National, where members of Congress also get free parking.

So, with assistance from West Virginia Sens. Shelley Moore Capito (R) and Joe Manchin III (D), members of the Washington region's delegation are attempting to quash even the *smallest* suggestion that any changes be made to the rules that govern air traffic at National. Their missive, sent this week, is straightforward.

"As Congress begins possible consideration of an infrastructure package, a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization bill, and the appropriations for U.S. Department of Transportation this year, we write to make clear our strong opposition to any attempts at changing the current High Density ("Slot") and Perimeter rules at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (Reagan National)."

They continue [in the letter](#) addressed to House and Senate leadership as well as heads of the respective committees:

"No Member of Congress appreciates another representative meddling with the assets in their state or district. We too, strongly oppose any attempts by other Members to dictate operations at these airports for their own personal convenience at great cost to our communities and constituents."

They then lay out some possible consequences:

"We have seen in past debates that proposals to significantly change the Slot and Perimeter rules have threatened to derail the entire FAA reauthorization process. We would all be better served by avoiding repetition of this debate so that all Members may focus on true issues of national importance."

Members of Congress, you've been warned.

National and Dulles are unique in that they are the only commercial airports in the United States owned by the government. Although Congress doesn't manage the airport's day-to-day operations — that's left to the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority — members can still step in and make changes.

MWAA officials blame congressional meddling for the troubles at Dulles, which has struggled to attract passengers following a rule change that allowed more flights at National to travel longer distances. The strict rules were put in place decades ago as part of an effort to fuel growth at Dulles, and for years, they worked. Flights of longer than 1,250 miles were prohibited at National, pushing travelers who wanted nonstop options to the West Coast to Dulles.

But since 2000, MWAA officials say, members of Congress — many from Western states — have [weakened](#) the rules, allowing 26 additional round-trip flights, including 18 “beyond-perimeter” flights to cities such as Phoenix, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Denver. The result: More people now fly in and out of National, even though Dulles is more than 10-times larger.

Over the years, lawmakers have gotten creative in their efforts to carve out exceptions for their districts. Last year, Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-Tex.) had language inserted in a defense-spending bill in an effort to get [direct service](#) from National to San Antonio — even though there is already direct service to the city from Dulles.

The year before, another Texan, Rep. Blake Farenthold (R) offered an amendment in the House Transportation Committee that would have expanded the perimeter to 1,425 miles. Farenthold acknowledged the proposed expansion would allow for direct flights to his home town, Corpus Christi, which is 1,384 miles from National.

“We appreciate the support of all these members of Congress because we think it's very important for the financial health of the airports and the regional economy,” airport spokesman David Mould said. “We appreciate people who support us in this.”