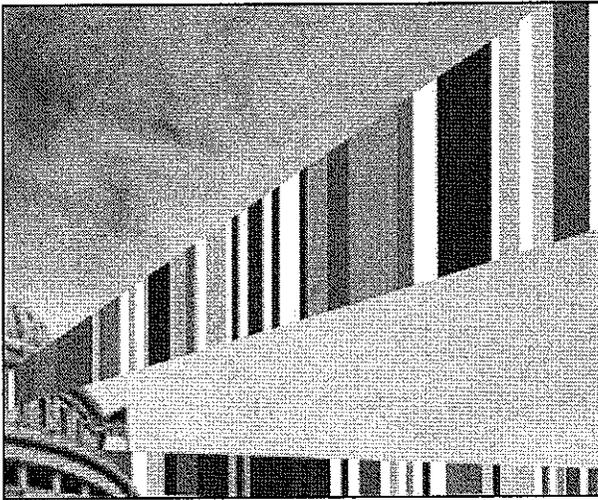


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Sending a blunt message to the airports board

By Editorial, Published: November 18

THE METROPOLITAN Washington Airports Authority — which runs the area’s two main airports, controls the Dulles Toll Road and, critically, is building Metro’s Silver Line extension to Dulles International Airport — has managed to incur the wrath of elected officials in Northern Virginia. It has done so with a virtuoso display of tone-deaf politics, at least partly as a result of the lack of accountability by the unelected, 13-member board that sets policy for the authority.

That board, earlier this year, nearly sabotaged plans for the Silver Line’s completion by insisting on an underground Metro station at the airport, where an aboveground station would save \$400 million. The imbroglio was resolved — and the underground station scrapped — thanks to the intervention of U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. Still, the episode left a bad taste. Now the federal government has taken a step to rein in the airports authority by making it easier to remove sitting board members.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf, the Northern Virginia Republican who is a long-standing champion of extending Metro to Dulles, pushed through Congress legislation that allows the governors of Virginia and Maryland, as well as the District mayor, to remove their respective appointees on the board “for cause.” (The president, who has three appointees on the board, already has that power.)

“Cause” is not defined in the measure, which President Obama signed into law Friday. But one could easily imagine it including a board member who disregards a blatant conflict of interest — for instance, one who is a union official in his day job and who, in his capacity with the airports authority, urges that a union-friendly labor agreement be attached to a major contract. That describes the actions this year of one board member, Dennis L. Martire, an official with the Laborers’ International Union of North

America.

The new law also allows the Virginia governor two more appointees and the mayor and the Maryland governor one each to what will become a 17-member board.

And it ends the service of two board members, both of them presidential appointees, whose terms are expired or expiring. (Without the legislation, they could have continued to serve until the White House got around to replacing them, which might have taken months or years.)

The airports authority board has reacted to the measure with grumbling resentment. One member, Mame Reiley, called it "a form of intimidation." That's one way of seeing it. Another is as a shot across the authority's bow and a reminder that it is not operating in a political vacuum. That's important, given its power to raise tolls to finance the Silver Line extension and its responsibility to complete the extension on time and on budget.

The authority, which plays a critical role in the region's economy, is now on notice. The message from Congress is this: Watch your step. High-handed tactics and a cavalier approach to spending will not go unnoticed.

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