

Sugar Land airport to lose federal funds for air traffic control

By Natalie Harms | March 26, 2013

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Funding for **Sugar Land Regional Airport**'s air traffic control tower will be cut because of federal budget sequestration. The city received formal notice March 22 from the **Federal Aviation Administration**.

Sugar Land officials said reverberating effects, such as flight delays, likely will impact other Houston airports.

The cuts prevent the airport from paying \$750,000 a year to air traffic controllers.

SLRA is one of 149 federally-funded air traffic control towers slated for closure beginning April 7.

"Closure of the tower will negatively impact safety at Sugar Land Regional Airport, which accommodates more than 250 takeoffs and landings every single day, with more than 100 Fortune 500 companies flying into SLRA to conduct business," said **Phil Savko**, the airport's director of aviation.

SLRA is one of eight nationally-rated general aviation airports in Texas, he said, and the No. 1 airport in the Houston area for both Intercontinental and Hobby airports. Houston is the fifth most congested airspace in the nation.

"We are disappointed that the FAA did not agree that closure of our tower would negatively impact the national interest," Savko said.

The towers are supported by the FAA's Federal Contract Tower Program and funded by the Airport Improvement Program, a program supported by user fees as opposed to federal tax dollars.

Because user fees fund the program, city officials had thought the contract program wouldn't be affected by federal cutbacks.

Prior to the March 22 announcement, **Doug Adolph**, city spokesman, said, "We are evaluating our options, looking at a possibility of operating without a tower or funding the six air traffic controllers ourselves."

If the tower is closed, pilots would be on their own to figure out taking off and landing procedures, as well as weather conditions that would be evaluated by the radar in the tower.

"Houston has a very congested air space, so there's a problem of safety," Savko said. "If we've got two jets coming 140 mph at each other, let's hope they see each other."

The more widespread repercussions of the possible tower closure would be build-ups at the other airports in Houston.

"We have about 40-60 jets that will have to land at Hobby where there will be an additional delay," Savko said. "It adds up to be about 1,000 hours of delay a year. And if there's a delay on one end, then there's a delay on the other end."

The "bottle-necking" will occur a while after the initial closure, Savko said. Travelers will see longer lines and more delays in the terminals.

While relatively small, the SLRA conducts a steady flow of business, employing more than 200. Adolph said that business would definitely be lost as a result of the cut.

"The bottom line is, it's impossible to place a dollar figure but we know it will be significant," he said.

Sugar Land stands to lose more than money; it will miss opportunities for business growth.

"A number of companies on a regular basis make plans for relocation or expansions, and something they consider is access to airports," Adolph said.

City officials are looking at options for providing temporary emergency funding to keep the tower open. They will also continue to work with federal officials with the hope of developing a long-term funding solution within the next six months to mitigate the impact on the city and region.

The other option for the city would be to fund the tower employees itself, said Adolph, adding that this would be near impossible not having budgeted for this in advance. But there is still the possibility that the government will not allow the tower's operation.

"If we are able to fund them ourselves, we have no idea if the FAA will allow us to operate the tower," Adolph said.

"It took us by surprise. We've had very little time to prepare to operate without a tower," he said.

Both Adolph and Savko said they and their colleagues question the legality of the funding cuts.

"The sequester should not have affected the towers, I'm not sure why the rules changed recently, but it's something we have to deal with now," Adolph said.