

Daley cites security in closing of Meigs

Pilots' group blasts overnight demolition of runway

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(Pictures by D. Lemkin, UCAN)



Tribune staff reports

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Saying he acted out of concern for public safety and desire to spare citizens "months and maybe years" of contentious debate, Mayor Richard Daley today defended his decision to close Meigs Field and have its runway torn up in the dark of night.

"We have done this to protect the millions of people who live, work and visit downtown Chicago in these very uncertain times," Daley said at a City Hall news conference after construction equipment early this morning put Meigs out of commission.

"The safety of the entire city has to take precedence over the wishes of a handful of private pilots and business people," the mayor said.

But Daley, who has long sought to close Meigs and replace it with a park and nature preserve, said the city had received no specific threat about a possible terrorist attack involving a private aircraft.

About 11 p.m. Sunday, several backhoes, large trucks carrying floodlights, generators and other equipment arrived at the airport and started working on the north-to-south runway. Chicago police barred access to the field for anyone else.

At dawn, the view from atop the Adler Planetarium showed a series of large, X-shaped carvings in the concrete runway's center. Large, illuminated "X" signs marked either end of the runway. The action came without public notice.

Asked why the city took the action without warning, Daley said: "To do this any other way would have been needlessly contentious and jeopardized public safety and prolonged concerns and anxiety among Chicagoans for months and maybe years."

The city has operated Meigs under a month-to-month lease with the Chicago Park District. The park district has terminated the lease, so the city

had no choice but to close the airport, city officials said.

Daley said the March 22 federal implementation of a no-fly zone over the city was "simply not enough" to ensure the safety of the public.

That rule prohibited small aircraft from flying within 3,000 feet of the ground over downtown and much of the North Side, but allowed continued access to Meigs.

But Daley complained that a temporary flight restriction could be rescinded at any time.

"More important, it does not address the problem that occurs every day as aircraft approach Meigs Field, with a few hundred yards and only a few seconds' flight time from our tallest buildings."

The mayor also expressed concern for the safety of "hundreds of thousands of people" at city festivals, museums and beaches within range of planes at Meigs. "With a sudden turn, they can cause a terrible tragedy downtown or in our crowded parks."

Daley promised that, if the Federal Aviation Administration doesn't let owners of 16 planes stranded at Meigs use a still-intact taxiway for takeoff, the city will reimburse them for removal of their craft by other means.

Steve Whitney, former president of Friends of Meigs Field, criticized the city's use of national security as justification for closing the airport.

Whitney said medical and air-sea rescue aircraft use Meigs, which he contended could also be used by emergency aircraft following a downtown disaster.

"It makes absolutely no sense from any standpoint, particularly for homeland security, to close Meigs Field," Whitney said.

At a City Hall press conference after Daley spoke, Whitney described the mayor's action as "a land grab" and "an abuse of power." He said that his organization would study possible legal action.

"We are absolutely shocked and dismayed," said Phil Boyer, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, another organization that has fought Meigs' closing.

"Mayor Daley has no honor and his word has no value," Boyer said. "The sneaky way he did this shows that he knows it was wrong."

But Boyer and an FAA spokesman conceded that the city appeared to have the legal right to close Meigs.

"The city can do this because Meigs is an unobligated airport," said the FAA's Tony Molinaro. About three years ago, Chicago repaid federal grant funds that had been used to improve Meigs, he said.

The closure did not violate FAA regulations, and the city had the authority to issue a formal Notice to Airmen notifying pilots of the closed runway, Molinaro said. An official with the Chicago Department of Aviation said the notice was issued at 3:02 a.m.

"We at the FAA were concerned to learn this morning of the decision to close Meigs Field, and we have heard already from members of the general aviation community, and we share their concern," Molinaro said.

"We feel that removing any centrally located airport such as Meigs from the national airspace system only diminishes capacity and puts added pressure on O'Hare and Midway airports."

Last year, Meigs handled 32,000 takeoffs and landings.

Separately, a spokeswoman for Gov. Rod Blagojevich said the governor also was not told of Daley's plans, but supported the mayor's decision to close Meigs as a matter of public safety.

Daley originally intended to close the airport in February 2002 and turn it into a park and nature preserve, but he held off doing so to win then-Gov. George Ryan's support for federal legislation backing the \$6.6 billion expansion of O'Hare International Airport.

Under terms of a deal reached with Ryan in December 2001, Daley agreed to keep the lakefront airport open until Jan. 1, 2026, although Meigs could have been closed anytime after Jan. 1, 2006, by a vote of the General Assembly.

The deal was supposed to have been solidified in federal legislation endorsing the O'Hare expansion.

But U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, earlier this month declared the federal bill dead because of opposition from his Republican counterpart, U.S. Sen. Peter Fitzgerald.

Asked about that deal at today's news conference, Daley replied, "There is no agreement whatsoever."

"The agreement is not in existence. There's no federal legislation," Daley said.

Tribune staff reporters Gary Washburn, Jon Hilkevitch, John Chase and Casey Bukro and CLTV and WGN-Ch. 9 contributed to this story.