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Airport Governance

Typical Composition of Airport Boards

The majority of air carrier airports are operated by independent authorities. The others tend to be departments within counties or cities, with a few operating as departments of state or multi-jurisdictional entities (e.g. Port Authority of New York and New Jersey which operates Newark, JFK and LaGuardia, not to mention the tunnels, roads, and seaport).

The reason authorities are often chosen is that airports serve relatively large areas and board membership often reflects the mix. In addition, air carrier airports tend to be self sufficient enterprise funds, operated very much like a private business. Moreover, autonomous authorities maintain a clear financial separation from other entities, which is important to ensure money generated on an airport is used there, pursuant to federal law, and not diverted 'downtown' for other governmental purposes.

Within the air carrier airport community, there are only two all-elected boards, Sarasota Manatee Airport Authority and Monterey Peninsula Airport District, CA. The typical authority consists of appointed members, some of whom may be automatic appointments of various elected officials. In Sarasota Manatee's early existence, there were automatic appointments consisting of the mayors of Bradenton and Sarasota and the County Chairmen of Sarasota and Manatee counties.

The Advantages of an Appointed Authority

The consensus among airport professionals is that appointed authorities are superior to elected ones. This concept goes on to acknowledge that business type enterprise funds are always better off if not governed by elected boards for two main reasons: 1) Enterprise funds are very different creature from more typical governmental dispensing of largesse, wherein tax monies are doled out based on priorities set through a political process, a process where electing members makes far more sense. 2) Secondly, the need for a rational business agenda far outweighs the other agendas individual members may bring to the table. Thus, elected boards often stray from their purpose, or change priorities over and over again as membership changes through the electorate.

Clearly, then, if one assumes the business purpose of the airport is to be the priority, it is essential to appoint members properly qualified for that role and attuned to it. Unfortunately, elected members may be elected for all the wrong reasons, and their individual agendas could be seriously misaligned with the business purpose. Exacerbating this problem in Sarasota/Manatee is the fact the Authority election is low key, generally not interesting to voters, and whose role voters usually do not understand. Thus, anyone can become an Authority Member, objective qualifications notwithstanding. None of this is to say, however, that properly qualified and oriented people cannot be found through the elective process; it is just that unqualified and misguided people can find their way on boards more easily on an elected basis.

Therein is the key to the problem. In particular, appointed boards are better screened, in that the appointing body or official knows far more about the prospective member than would otherwise obtain in the elective process. In addition, the field of candidates for appointment is vastly large and more potentially qualified, since may excellent candidates choose not to engage in the elective process. It is generally the case that appointees tend to be among the very best people in a community, with substantial experience and credentials, and whose talents, disposition and orientation is known. A final point, is that most appointee systems provide for removing appointees who don't work out.

Methods of Appointment

There is no best way to appoint a board. One multi-jurisdictional example is the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport Authority, an independent authority composed of appointees from each of the three cities. Each city appoints for a four (4) year term three (3) individuals. The nine total members then set policy by a majority of a quorum. The beauty of this for this particular authority is that no individual city controls the action, which in a noise context for example, is important, in that only Burbank has a noise problem; the tail can't wag the dog.

The Greater Orlando Aviation Authority and the Hillsborough Aviation Authority are both five member boards with two automatic appointments and three gubernatorial appointments. Some boards are all gubernatorial appointments, others vary with all local appointments or combinations thereof. In short, how appointments get done is less important than how well candidates are screened before they're appointed. Some communities allow appointments partly by the business community, and others require that appointees have certain qualifications and experience to be eligible for appointment.

Transitional Issue

Recognizing some current board members want their seats, it may be appropriate to implement appointments at the end of existing terms. That would permit a transition, yet still preserve the elected members' term of office.

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