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How the White House grounded Shuster's FAA bill

By **LAUREN GARDNER** and **KATHRYN A. WOLFE** | 04/02/2018 05:08 AM EDT

President Donald Trump threw his weight last summer behind a dramatic makeover of air traffic control in the U.S. — saying the plan to break up the Federal Aviation Administration and spin off thousands of its employees would rescue the country from “an ancient, broken, antiquated, horrible system that doesn’t work.”

“It’s time to join the future,” Trump said in a June speech in the White House’s East Room, where House Transportation Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), a longtime champion of the air traffic control overhaul, sat in the first row. The president pledged that “if we adopt these changes, Americans can look forward to cheaper, faster and safer travel.”

But less than 10 months later, the plan — supported by the major airlines but opposed by private plane and business jet owners, rural interests and some key Senate Republicans — is dead. And sources tell POLITICO that Trump’s lack of enthusiasm killed it.

Shuster asked Trump during a Feb. 14 meeting to help him sway about a dozen wavering Republican lawmakers to support the legislation, even providing a list of names, according to two people familiar with the meeting's details. After a week of silence, White House officials broke the news to Shuster that no help was coming — and Trump no longer endorsed the plan.

Without the White House to help cajole and twist arms, Shuster decided to pull the plug on the bill, H.R. 2997 (115), those sources said.

"I was told that Shuster was very upset and that he decided at that point to — he probably couldn't garner the votes to go back to leadership and say, 'I have the votes to move my bill,'" said one of the people familiar with the matter. "My understanding is that he had asked [for help] earlier," and got a call back "to say that that wasn't going to happen."

The fate of Shuster's air traffic control push is an object lesson in how even Trump's vocal support for an ambitious piece of legislation doesn't guarantee that the White House will do the hard work of cajoling lawmakers to vote for it. That dynamic — also seen in the White House's shifting positions on immigration, health care and last year's mammoth tax bill, H.R. 1 (115) — could also spell trouble for Trump's other proposals, including his stymied plan to gin up \$1.5 trillion in government and private infrastructure investments.

It's unclear why the administration pulled the rug from under the FAA bill, which the White House had also embraced in two budget proposals. But a third airline lobbyist said the White House had never put any real effort into pushing for the legislation behind the scenes, which was needed to shift the political dynamics that already had been at play for over a year.

Shuster laid the blame for the FAA bill's demise squarely at Trump's feet.

"My Democratic opponents, we were gonna get some of them on board; Republicans in the House, a number of them that wouldn't go with me," he told reporters on March 14.

"Leadership was great with it; in the Senate we have Republicans [who opposed it]. And then for some reason, at the eleventh hour, the White House decided somewhere there, they decided they weren't going to be for it."

Asked about why Trump seemingly reversed his support, a White House aide said he still "supports transforming the ATC system" but didn't address Shuster's proposal specifically.

The bill was to be a legacy for Shuster, who is retiring from Congress next year. He has pushed for years for a "transformational" effort that would split up the FAA, removing air traffic control operations and its roughly 15,000 controllers and transferring them into a newly created private, nonprofit corporation led mostly by representatives of the aviation industry. As envisioned by Shuster's bill, that board would have essentially set prices and practices, under the FAA's oversight, for the way the air traffic control is performed in the U.S. — an enormous and consequential change.

It's not the first time anyone has attempted such a thing — former President Bill Clinton had proposed a similar arrangement — but it is the closest anyone has come to making it happen. But in the end, it wasn't close enough, tanked by strong opposition from owners of private planes and business jets, lawmakers' reluctance to cede direct oversight of air traffic control, and misgivings about cracking open the FAA in a time when U.S. commercial aviation is the safest it's been in the history of flight.

Now, his legacy bill in tatters, Shuster has positioned himself as Trump's point man in pushing Trump's infrastructure package forward — another goal that may depend on a mercurial White House.

Trump needs to be on the front lines pushing the effort, Shuster said when asked whether he was concerned about the possibility of a repeat with an infrastructure package.

"There's not a lot of support in the Congress for what they put forward, so somewhere there's got to be a meeting of the minds if he wants to do it," Shuster said. "And he really needs to get out there and lead."

Shortly before the FAA bill tanked, the industry began buzzing again in February that Shuster was trying to bring the bill up for a vote in the House. It had been widely believed that Shuster lacked the votes to win passage, but the latest push kicked up a whirlwind of speculation that he'd been able to secure the votes of the handful of recalcitrant Republicans he needed.

It was not to be, however.

Despite the loss, Shuster said he's "very proud" of how far he was able to go with the legislation, which the Transportation Committee approved with no Democratic support.

"I believe someday, some chairman of this committee, and some president and some Senate, will pass this, and we will do what the rest of the world is doing and America will be better off for it," Shuster said.

Brianna Gurciullo contributed to this report.