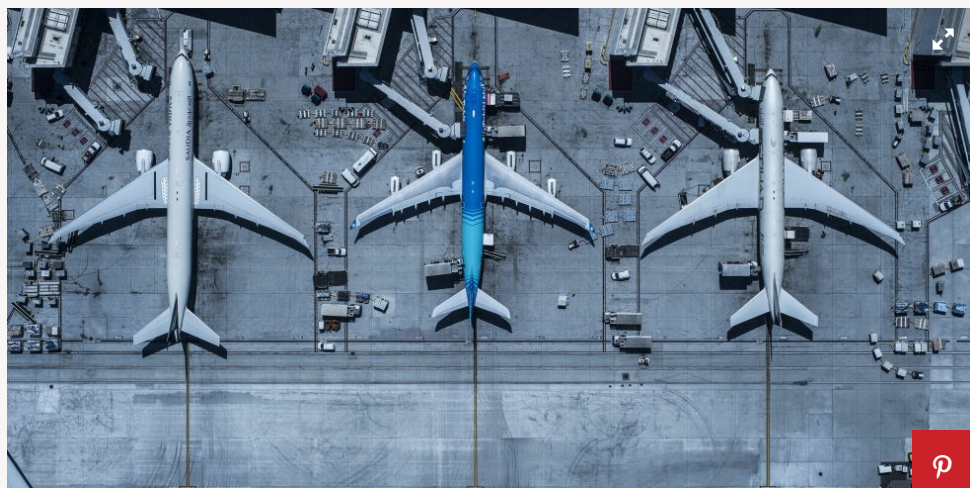


# Trump's Vision for Air Traffic Control Could Cut Taxes But Raise Ticket Prices

Privatizing air traffic control is an idea that's been floated before, and whether it's a good idea depends on who you ask.



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By Eric Tegler Jun 6, 2017

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On Monday President Trump kicked off what the White House is calling "infrastructure week" by proposing an idea [that's been kicked around for years](#) – privatizing the nation's air traffic control (ATC) system.

The president's initiative would basically convert the air traffic control system, run by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), into a not-for-profit cooperative. It would purportedly reduce ATC delays and increase air traffic throughput while shifting the funding for air-traffic control from the collection of taxes on fuel and airline tickets to a user-fee model that would be established by a 13-member board.

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As an opinion piece in [The Atlantic](#) [points out](#), the potential move is more of a bureaucratic reform than an actual

infrastructure program and one that can be done without big spending.

Supporters of ATC privatization say it would relieve the FAA of operating a business that it is also responsible for regulating. The FAA is also currently in the midst of trying to modernize air traffic control, shifting the management of airborne aircraft from ground-based radars to satellite-enabled GPS via its [NextGen program](#) (though it's [been plagued by delays and cost overrun](#)). Privatization advocates also claim that shifting air traffic control away from the FAA would speed the process and shift about 30,000 unionized traffic

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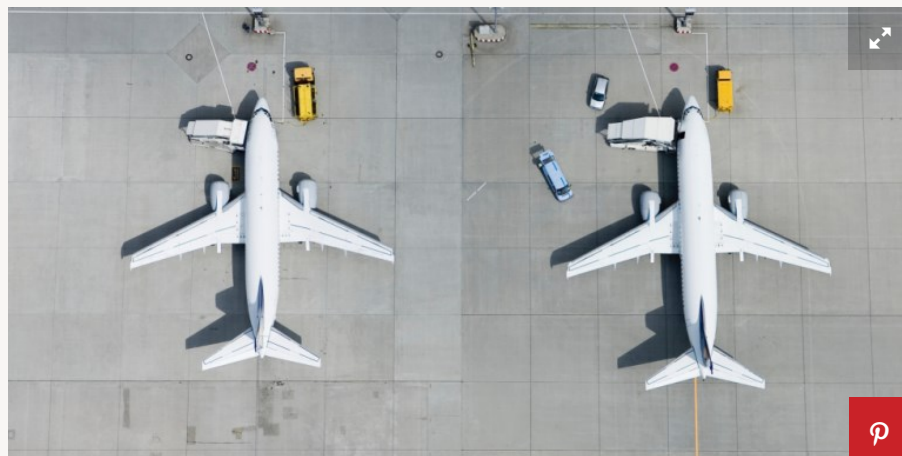
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controllers off the government payroll, an idea supported by the ATC union.



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But critics aren't buying the efficiency argument. They say investing more resources to speed the rollout of NextGen is a better idea than privatizing an air traffic control system whose safety record is very strong. A [non-profit airline consumer organization](#) argues that the user-fee model on which the proposal is based essentially privatizes the power to tax.

Most directly, that could have implications for airline ticket prices. Presently, you can break down the proportion of taxes and surcharges, which factor into your ticket price via [airline websites](#). Air carriers and ticket agents are required to include all mandatory taxes and fees in published airfares by the Department of Transportation. How airlines would determine and report the user-fee costs they'd pass on to you under a privatized ATC system is unclear. Would your ticket price increase? That's hard to say.

On the other hand, a privatized ATC could mean lower taxes. Congressional inaction which has saddled the FAA with short-term spending extensions rather than long-term reauthorizations would be obviated by ATC privatization, providing a stable funding stream for air traffic controllers which wouldn't be tax-based. Trump says, "this new entity will not need taxpayer money, which is very shocking when people hear that."

Of course, airlines like the privatization idea, seeing the initiative as placing more power in their hands, stabilizing ATC funding, and speeding modernization. Jon Weaks, president of the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA), told *Popular Mechanics* that America's air traffic controllers "oversee the busiest and most complex airspace in the world, and they are doing it with dedication and professionalism despite being hampered by a nearly 30-year low in controller staffing levels and saddled with an erratic funding stream from Washington."





LAX air traffic control center.

Getty + Chad Slattery

However, some consumer groups and general aviation groups like the Aircraft Owner's and Pilot's Association (AOPA) do not like the idea. AOPA is concerned that the user-fee model would negatively impact private pilots by directly conferring fees on their use of the ATC system (they already pay fees to fund ATC via a fuel tax), putting in jeopardy one of the greatest freedoms Americans have – the ability to fly privately [at a reasonable cost](#).

"While AOPA is open to proposals aimed at making the air traffic control system more efficient and delivering technology in a timely and cost-effective manner, we have consistently said we will not support policies that impose user fees on general aviation," [AOPA CEO, Mark Baker says](#). "We are also concerned about the impact of these proposed reforms on general aviation based on what we have seen in other countries."

The impact of the president's plan on your air travel costs will likely depend on whether it actually produces greater air traffic control efficiency through quicker NextGen implementation and lower ATC controller costs. But the big question that still remains is how airlines will pass on their user-fee costs to passengers.

But with the current congressional gridlock, the merits of ATC privatization may not even be put fully to the test.

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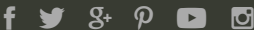
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