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## Too many planes at O'Hare

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O'Hare International Airport can safely handle 100 arrivals an hour and 100 departures an hour--when weather conditions are perfect. Weather conditions in this neck of the woods often are far from perfect, as everyone knows. Nonetheless, the airlines have been scheduling as many as 120 arrivals in some peak hours. Given those numbers, it's no surprise that delays at O'Hare set a monthly record in May. There were nearly 58,600 delayed flights at O'Hare in the first half of 2004--more than the full-year totals for 2000, 2001 and 2002.

The Federal Aviation Administration estimates that O'Hare is "likely responsible for a significant portion of delays recorded nationally" at the nation's top 35 airports.

Delays of that magnitude are unacceptable, U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta recently declared, because they ripple through the nation's aviation network. He and FAA Administrator Marion Blakey have called the domestic airlines serving O'Hare to a summit in Washington on Wednesday to address this. Blakey is expected to demand that peak-period landings be limited to 86 commercial flights an hour.

Airline executives need to show up at this summit in a giving mood. The alternative to a negotiated, voluntary reduction in flights is likely to be the reimposition of mandatory flight caps at O'Hare, and that would be a huge mistake.

The government imposed such caps at O'Hare, New York's LaGuardia and Kennedy International, and at what is now called Reagan National in Washington, in 1968--a full decade before deregulation spurred the growth of air travel. The caps weren't fully lifted until 2002. The limits at those major airports over decades surely masked the underlying demand that was building and delayed solutions such as the expansion of O'Hare. The caps retard economy activity and constitute an unnecessary government regulation. They serve nobody's interests.

The airlines are likely to arrive in Washington pointing fingers at each other. Earlier this year, the two dominant airlines at O'Hare, United and American, reduced their projected summer flight schedules by 7.5 percent to ease the crunch at the airport. But other carriers at O'Hare, particularly Independence Air, ramped up their own flights and filled the void. As a result, the overcrowding during peak hours remains a very serious problem.

The airlines aren't serving their customers by trying to run more flights than the airport can handle. It is, in a sense, false advertising to schedule a flight to land at 4 p.m. at O'Hare, knowing the flight will be late 70 percent of the time. That may usher in more customers, but it ushers out more angry

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customers.

So the airlines are going to have to agree to across-the-board reductions in their peak-period flights. That will have to include some give by United and American, though they have already taken on some flight reductions. The fact is they still have close to a duopoly at O'Hare, and they will have to agree to some more flight cuts.

That flights will have to be reduced though demand grows is bitter news for the Chicago economy. The long-term answer is to build more capacity at O'Hare and develop a new airport in the south suburbs to meet that growing demand. Both projects must be expedited. The FAA's Blakey seemed to understand the urgency of the O'Hare expansion, saying the agency is "moving full speed ahead" on its review of the plans.

But both airport projects are years and years away from being done. Until the Chicago region can grow to meet the aviation market demand, the carriers will have to agree to limits. That's bad for the airlines and bad for Chicago--and the best argument to move quickly on building and expanding airports here.

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