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INTERMODAL TRANSPORTATION

Potential Strategies Would Redefine Federal Role in Developing Airport Intermodal Capabilities

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-05-727, a report to the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

With the number of airplane passengers using U.S. airports expected to grow to almost 1 billion by the year 2015, ground access to U.S. airports has become an important factor in the development of our nation's transportation networks. Increases in the number of passengers traveling to and from airports will place greater strains on our nation's airport access roads and airport capacity, which can have a number of negative economic and social effects. U.S. transportation policy has generally addressed these negative economic and social effects from the standpoint of individual transportation modes and local government involvement. However, European transportation policy is increasingly focusing on intermodal transportation as a possible means to address congestion without sacrificing economic growth.

This report addresses the development of intermodal capabilities at U.S. airports, including (1) the roles of different levels of government and the private sector; (2) the extent such facilities have been developed; (3) benefits, costs, and barriers to such development; and (4) strategies to improve these capabilities.

GAO provided a draft of this report to the Department of Transportation (DOT) and Amtrak. DOT generally concurred with the report, and Amtrak had no comments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-727.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud, (202) 512-2834, siggerudk@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

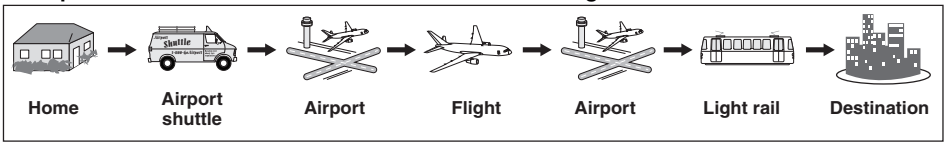
State and local government agencies have primary responsibility for developing intermodal capabilities at U.S. airports. Generally airports and local transit agencies are heavily involved, especially if these projects are part of a local transit system. The federal government has not established specific goals or funding programs to develop intermodal capabilities at airports. However, it provides funding for projects fitting the criteria of other programs. The private sector may undertake a variety of roles.

Most major U.S. airports have direct connections to local transit systems rather than to nationwide rail or bus systems. For example, 64 out of 72 airports have connections to local bus systems, and 27 airports have connections to local rail systems. At the same time, only 19 airports have connections to nationwide rail or bus systems. A number of airports have plans to enhance their connections to local rail and bus systems.

U.S. and European transportation officials and experts cited the benefits for intermodal capabilities at airports to include increased transportation options, reduced road congestion, and reduced short-haul flights. The costs of intermodal projects using rail are typically significant. Barriers cited include the difficulty of securing needed funding, disincentives for airport support such as potential reductions in airport parking revenue, geographical and physical land constraints, limitations of the existing nationwide rail network, and inconveniences in comparison to using cars that limit consumer demand.

Two differing strategies developed from our prior work would help public decision makers improve intermodal capabilities at airports. The first strategy would increase flexibility within current federal transportation programs to encourage a more systemwide approach to transportation planning and development. The second strategy would involve a fundamental shift in federal transportation policy's focus on local decision making by increasing the role of the federal government in order to develop more integrated air and rail networks and would be closer to the strategy followed in Europe. While the first strategy would most likely lead to a continued focus on the development of intermodal connections to local transit systems, the second strategy could develop more integrated air and rail networks, either nationwide or along particularly congested corridors. The second strategy would be costly, and high benefits, which would be difficult to achieve, would be needed to justify this investment.

Example of Intermodal Connections for an Airline Passenger



Source: GAO.