



Capitol Complex Bill: A No-Fly Zone

May 11, 2016 - While state leaders seem thrilled to starve Mississippi's revenue by approving \$575 million in tax cuts (amid a \$50 million shortfall, no less), they are not so eager to sacrifice tax cuts for the City of Jackson. So say City representatives contending with a brutal 2016 legislative session that saw GOP legislators [raid](#) the City's management of its own airport.

"They put a poison pill in the Capitol Complex bill. Even Jackson's own delegation couldn't support it, and I was originally for the bill," said Rep. Kathy Sykes, D-Jackson.

House Bill 1564 originally allowed the state to divert tax money to the state's capital city in order to fix potholes, pave streets, and pay for safety and infrastructure improvements. The newly created district would sit in the area between Mayes Street in its northernmost portion and just south of Jackson State University in its southernmost territory. The Pearl River and Bailey Avenue would set its western and eastern borders. All territory within would see the benefit of up to \$21 million in additional revenue granted by the State.

Well, not granted, actually. All municipalities pay money to the State in the form of sales and property taxes, but the State allows all municipalities to draw back about 18.5 percent of their annual payment to the State. House Bill 1564 would have allowed the City of Jackson to take back an extra 12.5 percent, on top of its 18.5 percent allotment.

Local political leaders in Jackson were already skittish about the State having considerable input in how exactly Jackson spent its own money deferred by the State, but amendments to the bill also created a new judge overseeing criminal cases in the local court. While many judicial watchdogs have been lobbying for extra judges to help the City or County clear some of their backlogs of criminal cases, locals were alarmed at the prospect of the proposed new judge being an unelected official appointed directly by the governor. Critics complained that the legislature and the governor were trying to create a GOP fiefdom within the majority Democratic central city.

A second, even more infuriating, change in the bill arrived "in the middle of the night on the last night of the session," [according](#) to Jackson City Council President Melvin Priestler, in the form of a drastic reduction in the tax deferment.

"The original deferment was 12.5 percent, giving us back about \$21 million a year of our own money, but on the Senate side, in conference, they lowered that deferment down to where the new figure was only about \$8 million," said Sykes. "It just wasn't worth keeping it anymore, not for what we had to give up. In addition to the governor-appointed judge and the bond reduction, it was just a paper title. The Hinds County delegation united against it and it died."

State leaders were happy to pull resources from the central city, even as GOP legislators passed SB 2162, which removes City governance from the Jackson-Medgar Wiley Evers International Airport located on City-owned and annexed property.

Senators voted 29-14, mostly along a party line split, to eliminate the governing board over the Jackson Municipal Airport Authority and replace it with a regional one.

Legislators in the powerful, white-majority suburbs of Rankin County want control of the airport, which sits on Jackson property surrounded by Rankin County. Critics argue that affluent whites have been abandoning the central city for four decades, but now want to take Jackson property with them on their way out.

SB 2162 author Sen. Josh Harkins, R-Flowood, insists, somehow, that the bill is not a power grab.

“It is not a takeover, it is an expansion of the board,” [said](#) Harkins. “Jackson will maintain the majority of spots on the board. They will maintain all the revenue.”

Jackson Sen. John Horhn, who opposes the takeover, said the City and its allies will take the fight all the way to the Federal Aviation Administration and further, if necessary.

Airport Authority board member Evelyn O. Reed said this is not the first time white suburbs have invaded minority-run airport authorities.

“Charlotte, North Carolina, experienced the same thing as Jackson,” Reed said, and warned that even now, three years after the state’s general assembly approved transferring the airport to a regional authority in 2013, the case is still in court.

“We’ll go to court, and - depending on the results - we’ll appeal,” Reed said.

Even though Rankin County Republican Gov. Phil Bryant quickly signed the takeover bill, Councilman Priester said the FAA has the final say on whether or not it will award a license to any new board arising from the law.

“The FAA generally frowns on changing operators,” Priester said. “They don’t like giving new licenses.”

It should be noted, however, that there is no predicting an FAA decision if a Republican administration enters the White House next year.

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