

## With stroke of pen, Inslee weighs in on controversial search for WA's next major airport



Pete Caster/Pete Caster / The Tacoma News Tribune

**Shea Johnson** Tue, May 16, 2023 at 5:30 AM PDT · 6 min read

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**Jay Inslee**

23rd Governor of Washington, United States

Washington Gov. Jay Inslee on Monday signed a bill into law that called for ending the current search for the state's next major airport as he expressed a desire for a deeper review of expanding existing facilities before contemplating a brand-new one.

Engrossed Substitute House Bill 1791 sought to immediately supplant the Commercial Aviation Coordinating Commission, which was tasked by state lawmakers in 2019 with recommending a preferred location for a potential new airport to fill a looming void in Washington's commercial flight capacity.

The CACC, created by the Legislature as a body of 15-voting members largely from the transportation industry, caused a firestorm in communities in and around Graham, Roy and East Olympia when in September it narrowed options for an airport location to three greenfield sites in those areas.

ESHB 1791 offers protection for Pierce and Thurston county residents who have fiercely resisted the prospects of a new airport landing near them and acts as a restart of the state's investigation into its aviation future.

"The pressure valve was getting ready to explode and this took the pressure off," Rep. Jake Fey, D-Tacoma, a primary bill sponsor, told The News Tribune.

But the governor's vetoes of four sections Monday also changed elements of the legislation.

For one, the bill will not go into effect immediately as proposed, but instead in 90 days from the April 23 end of the legislative session. While that's a typical timeline, it also means that the CACC will still be active when the group hits its June 15 deadline to make an airport site recommendation to the state and the group will expire on its own two weeks later.

In his veto message, Inslee wrote that an emergency clause was not needed because the CACC's final report "should reflect the findings of the Commission that they do not have a single site recommendation at this time."

Inslee also nixed a section of the bill that spelled out the functions of the new work group that will replace the CACC.

In his veto message, the governor made it clear that he did so because that section directed the work group to simultaneously consider existing airport expansion and sites for a new airport.

"However, it is important for the state to first fully consider increasing capacity at existing airports throughout the state, excluding SeaTac, before it considers a new airport," he wrote.

The new work group, whose role will be limited to information-gathering, was left with a broad directive: "a comprehensive investigation of airport capacity in the state and the best way to address aviation needs in the context of overall state transportation needs in the next 20 years using independent verifiable data."

Mike Faulk, a spokesperson for the governor, told The News Tribune that there could be executive action later to give formal guidance to the work group but that remained to be seen.

Fey, who appeared at the signing along with anti-airport activists, said that any complications that may arise from the governor's vetoes could be fixed. For instance, new work group members could be given specific assignments during the next budget process.

"I would still say, 'mission accomplished,'" he said.

## **Bill was response to outcry**

The possibility of a two-runway airport drew concerns from residents, area lawmakers, tribal groups and others about the potential effect on quality of life, wildlife and the environment in the region. It also raised questions over logistics. Opponents waged a several-month campaign with hopes of preventing the CACC from circling any of the greenfield site finalists for recommendation.

In February, Fey, along with Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake and other lawmakers, introduced HB 1791 to replace the CACC with a new work group, arguing that the pandemic hadn't allowed for the CACC to thoroughly review sites or conduct proper community engagement.

The bill, which garnered bipartisan support and passed the House in March and the Senate last month, also mandated that any sites that interfered with nearby military operations be excluded from the new work group's considerations. Each of the three greenfield sites homed in on by the CACC fit that description, according to Joint Base Lewis-McChord officials.

As part of the bill -- kept intact by Inslee despite shifting the focus to existing airport expansion -- the new work group must submit a report by next summer that [explicitly lists the locations that are precluded from further review](#) due to military conflict.

"People need some certainty," Fey said.

## **Projected problems persist**

Inslee's signature represents the culmination of the months-long battle over the potential siting of Washington's next major airport, but it does not signal an end to the search for a thus far elusive answer to a projected shortfall in the state's commercial passenger service capacity.

"(Seattle-Tacoma International Airport) will reach capacity very soon and our economy depends on air travel and air freight in order to operate," state Sen. Marko Liias, D-Everett, said during the April 12 hearing when ESHB 1791 passed the Senate. "So we need to figure out a path forward that ensures we've got adequate capacity to move people and goods into and out of our region and also respect local communities who have legitimate concerns that need to be addressed."

The bill acknowledges that commercial and general aviation, as well as air cargo operations, are growing and that there is a projected near-future gap between the demand for such services and the capacity to meet that demand.

The Puget Sound Regional Council estimated in May 2021 that the region was expected to see 27 million more annual passengers by 2050 than it could accommodate and double the current demand for cargo. Projections also showed Sea-Tac reaching capacity by 2032.

The expected shortfall is not lost on state Sen. Karen Keiser, D-Des Moines, who sponsored the bill that gave the CACC its instructions four years ago. Keiser, whose district includes Sea-Tac, expressed doubt last month that revisiting the problem in a different way would lead to any meaningful changes.

"It is going to kick the can down the road and the effort, I believe, is doomed," she said during the Senate hearing April 12.

The region's leaders had identified a need for more aviation facilities as far back as 1982, she said, and the number of prospective sites have decreased since then due to other development. Keiser predicted that the new work group would face the same issues that the CACC had been wrestling with.

"At this point, we're at an impasse," she said.

Asked whether the shift in approach, as directed by ESHB 1791, merely meant delaying the inevitable discomfort of trying to site an airport, Fey underscored that the new work group would have more money and more time to get it right.

"It's better to get a good answer in a good process in a few years from now, than get a bad answer as a result of a bad process now," Fey said.

Meanwhile, the CACC, which did not appear close to homing in on a single site recommendation during its last meeting in late March, also could not consider adopting any choice at that time due to lack of a quorum. It canceled its most recent planned session May 4 after the Senate passed ESHB 1791.

"In recognition of the legislature's expressed intent and recent action, it would not be appropriate for the CACC to make such a final recommendation until the governor's action on this bill is known," it wrote on its website.

A message seeking comment from a CACC spokesperson Monday was not immediately returned.