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Eastern Iowa Airport Officials and Safety Officers at Odds Over Change of Hours

By George C. Ford and Forrest Saunders, Reporters



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CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa - Public safety officers who also function as firefighters and emergency medical personnel at the Eastern Iowa Airport are fighting a proposed change in their hours, which is scheduled to take effect Sept. 21.

The 12 officers, represented by International Association of Firefighters Local 2607, want the airport to retain the existing schedule of 24 hours on duty and 72 hours off that has been in effect since June 2008.

The Cedar Rapids Airport Commission, which operates the airport, is proposing to return to shifts of 10 hours per day and 80 hours per two weeks. The commission also plans to reduce the hours

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that the airport operates from 24 to 20 per day, with officers on duty from 4:30 a.m. to 12:30 a.m. — which would leave a four-hour gap.

Local 2607 filed a prohibited practice complaint with the Public Employment Relations Board that alleged the commission was not bargaining in good faith when it proposed reducing the airport's operating hours to 20 to coincide with the hours change.

In a ruling issued June 17, the PERB found that the commission had the exclusive right to set hours of operation.

Local 2607 and the commission agreed to an independent impasse procedure involving a third-party arbitrator to resolve the hours issue. Hugh Perry, the arbitrator, held a hearing on July 11, and both parties submitted summary statements of their positions.

The commission contended the current 24/72 schedule does not provide what it deemed adequate staffing by public safety officers at "critical times" when peak passenger traffic is using the airport. It further argued that the 10-hour shifts more closely resemble the schedules of law enforcement agencies in Iowa, none of which have a work schedule of more than 12 hours per day.

The commission also contended that a 10-hour schedule reduces fatigue.

"Since these employees are empowered and equipped to use deadly force and make other decisions which have life-altering consequences, it is more reasonable to schedule them for shorter periods of time," the commission wrote in its summary.

Local 2607, on the other hand, argued that the airport must be secure 24 hours a day, a function performed by the public safety officers.

The union also contended that an emergency during the 12:30 and 4:30 a.m. gap would require the Cedar Rapids Fire Department to respond. That would increase the current time for a rescue crew and equipment to reach the site from 2 minutes to up to 10 minutes if the CRFD were used.

"Cedar Rapids firefighters have not the training or equipment to handle an airplane fire," the union wrote in its summary. "They don't have the foam required to extinguish aircraft fires."

Perry, in a ruling issued on Aug. 19, said the commission's hours proposal was the "most reasonable" presented to him.

Airport Director Tim Bradshaw said the Cedar Rapids Fire Department already responds to aircraft accidents, regardless of the time of day.

"In fact, the last two accidents were off airport property, and the Cedar Rapids Fire Department handled them," Bradshaw said. "This will not represent a change in terms of any additional response from the city."

Bradshaw said the commission chose the period between 12:30 and 4:30 a.m. because there are no commercial flights then.

"The FAA requires us to have aircraft rescue and firefighting personnel on duty for commercial flights — 15 minutes before the first flight and 15 minutes after the last flight," Bradshaw explained. "There is little or no activity between those hours. The control tower closes at 11:30 p.m. and does not reopen until 5 a.m."

Bradshaw said the commission plans to implement the hours change on Sept. 21 to coincide with the start of a pay period. He said the change is not related to the federal budget sequestration.

Des Moines lawyer Charles Gribble, who represents Local 2607, did not return phone calls by deadline.

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