

Privatizing Lambert airport may move a step closer with move by city committee

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ST. LOUIS — A city committee may be poised to make a major move toward privatizing St. Louis Lambert International Airport — issuing a “request for qualifications,” or an RFQ, to companies interested in leasing the city-owned facility.

“Possible vote on issuance of RFQ” is the final item on the agenda for Wednesday’s meeting of the Airport Advisory Working Group.

For months that panel has held off a decision as city officials conducted behind-the-scenes discussions with Lambert’s airlines on what should be sought in a possible lease.

The panel’s chairman, City Budget Director Paul Payne, confirmed that this is the first time that one of its agendas listed an RFQ vote as a possibility.

He declined to comment on whether the city and the airlines had reached agreement on what to seek from bidders.

The working group has four voting members: Mayor Lyda Krewson, Aldermanic President Lewis Reed and Comptroller Darlene Green, or their designees, and Payne.

Three other members don’t have a vote — Airport Director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge, Alderman Marlene Davis, D-19th Ward, and City Counselor Julian Bush.

After companies respond to an RFQ, the committee pick ones from which to seek actual lease proposals.

As it stands now, any final deal would require approval of the Board of Aldermen; the city’s top fiscal body, the Board of Estimate and Apportionment; Lambert’s airlines and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Critics of the contentious privatization idea have been pushing to require a citywide vote, as well.

Supporters of considering privatization, including Krewson and Reed, have said it could maximize city revenue and improve the airport.

Opponents, including Green, say the city shouldn’t give up control of such a key asset and that a private operator would put bottom-line profit ahead of public service.

Critics also have blasted the involvement of retired investor Rex Sinquefield. A Sinquefield-funded nonprofit funded the city’s application to the FAA and is on a team of consultants advising the city on the issue. Sinquefield is paying the consultants and will be reimbursed only if a lease deal is approved.

A city document issued last week projects that once an RFQ is issued, it would take about a year to complete the entire privatization process if that’s what is eventually decided.

- *Index terms:* st. louis lambert international airport;airport privatization;airport advisory working group;lyda krewson;darlene green;lewis reed;paul payne;local-government;local-politics;major-industry
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