

House's federal air security vote today Does your U.S.representative want screeners to be federal employees?

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WASHINGTON - Suburban Republicans are expected to vote today for a bill to federalize supervisors of airport baggage screeners.

Most Democrats, including suburban Rep. Jan Schakowsky, are expected to oppose the bill. Instead, they support a plan to turn all baggage screeners into government employees. As part of the effort to toughen security after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, House members will vote on the airport security bill today following a heated debate Wednesday. Both sides in the narrowly divided chamber predict a close vote.

Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat, is the only suburban representative who said she will vote for the bill to federalize all security.

Six other suburban Republican representatives said they probably will support the GOP bill that federalizes supervision, but allows private security firms to continue employing screeners.

Even if that bill passes the House, further negotiation will be required because the Senate unanimously passed a bill to make all airport security personnel federal employees at the nation's 142 largest airports.

Federalizing security such as airport screeners, Democrats argue, would result in a more qualified staff that could better recognize dangerous objects and individuals at checkpoints. It also would result in staffers who answer to the government instead of independent contractors and subcontractors hired by airports.

Under the GOP bill, all screeners - 28,000 of them - would have to be American citizens. This means more than half of all screeners nationwide would be fired, said Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican. Kirk inserted this amendment and other regulations into the bill.

At Dulles Airport, where terrorists surpassed checkpoints to hijack a plane Sept. 11 and crash it into the Pentagon, 90 percent of screeners were not citizens, Kirk said.

Kirk said he opposes federalizing all screeners mostly because civil service rules would protect them from being fired.

"We forget one thing about Sept. 11: All the terrorists that entered the United States were admitted in to our country by federal employees working for the state department or INS," he said. "We have to make sure that the screeners, if they're incompetent, can be discharged."

Rep. Henry Hyde, a Wood Dale Republican, most likely will vote for the GOP bill, his spokesperson said, adding that Hyde is most concerned about creating a massive federal bureaucracy.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert, who also supports the bill to federalize only supervisors, said the United States should use European and Israeli airport security as examples.

"Some believe that the answer to our airport security concerns is a full government takeover of the entire process," said Hastert, a Yorkville Republican. "But that has been tried and failed elsewhere."

A completely federal airport security system failed in other countries because incompetent workers could not be fired, some Republicans said.

Rich Carter, a spokesman for Rep. Donald Manzullo, an Egan Republican whose district includes McHenry County, said, "They found that there was actually better service provided by private employees, and they've had to deal with terrorism a lot more than we have. I think we can learn something from them."

Despite controversial differences in which workers will be made federal employees, the two bills are similar in that they both provide for security measures such as bulletproof bulkheads, high technology screening equipment and federal marshals on flights.