Chicago's Daley shut down Meigs Field for development

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Think you need eminent domain to take something? Not in Chicago.

In the middle of the night on March 30, 2003, without prior warning, Chicago Mayor Daley sent bulldozers through fences to destroy the runway of Meigs Field, a small airport adjacent to downtown Chicago.

The bulldozers carved giant Xs on the runway, a symbol recognized by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) that means that "this airport is closed." The action stranded over a hundred airplanes.

In 1994, Mayor Daley had announced that he intended to convert the airport to a park, saying that it was what the "people" wanted, but when Daley sent the bulldozers in 2003, he claimed it was because the airport posed an immediate "security threat."

Meigs Field was built on Northerly Island, a man-made peninsula that was built for the World's Fair in 1933.

The airport was constructed in 1948, and by 1955 had become the world's busiest single-runway airport. An air traffic tower was constructed in 1952 and a terminal was built in 1961.

A 50-year lease for the airport expired in 1996, clearing the way for a legal closing of the airport, but Daley's efforts to do so were met with stiff resistance. In fact, he did close it temporarily in 1996, but it reopened in 1997 after the Friends of Meigs Field and the AOPA (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association) worked together to keep the airport open for at least five more years.

Most of the aircraft traffic at Meigs were small planes that served businesses in downtown Chicago, generating about 57 million dollars per year in economic activity.

The AOPA spent almost half a million dollars in the year following the closure in an attempt to keep it open, but within a few months of Daley's nighttime raid, the airport had been completely demolished using funds that Daley diverted from O'Hare and Midway airports.

The demolition proceeded despite public outcry and protests by local newspapers. Daley was determined to get what he wanted regardless of public opinion.

The AOPA conducted an extensive informational and lobbying campaign, and joined in suits by others that had been filed in state and federal courts.

The AOPA also filed a complaint with the FAA, who agreed that there were "reasonable grounds" to prosecute Daley's actions as violations of federal law.

Federal law requires that a 30-day notice be given to the FAA prior to closing an airport, unless it is an emergency. Daley claimed that an immediate security threat existed in an apparent attempt to escape prosecution.

However, the FAA did not see it that way, and prosecuted the City of Chicago.

On September 25, the FAA announced a settlement with the City of Chicago that allowed the city to admit to no wrongdoing, but after spending more than \$550,000 in legal fees defending itself, Chicago will be required to pay a \$33,000 fine (\$1,100 per day for the 30-day period of notification that Daley ignored) and must repay more than a million dollars back to O'Hare and Midway airports, funds that were illegally diverted to pay for demolition of the airport.

As a result of the case, the "Meigs Field Provision" has been passed into law, increasing the daily fine from \$1,100 to \$10,000 for each day that the 30-day notification requirement is violated.

Airports around the country are being scrutinized by environmental groups seeking to prevent expansion of runways or the construction of additional runways that will make the airports safer.

Hillsboro airport at Portland, Oregon, is meeting stiff resistance from environmentalists and neighbors complaining of noise. In Kennewick, Washington, Vista Field Airport is being closed to make room for business and housing development.

Since even small airports require large areas of land, they are increasingly becoming targets for closure so that the land can be put into the tax base. However, even small airports are vital to a community's economic condition.

Cities that don't recognize their importance will eventually discover that industries and businesses that seek to relocate will pass them by because they don't have an airport. Chicago is certain to feel the loss of Meigs Field.

Though no airport has been closed in the manner that Meigs was ten years ago, airports, like churches, are being targeted to make way for development.

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