

A ‘very tough’ job: Air traffic control overhaul faces huge hurdles

The Trump administration has been touting early successes in its modernization effort. But there’s a lot more to do.

BY ORIANA PAWLYK | 04/17/2026 05:00 AM EDT



A plane flies by a control tower at Newark Liberty International Airport on Nov. 7, 2025, in Newark, N.J. | Andres Kudacki/AP

The Trump administration’s ambitious effort to rebuild the nation’s fragile air traffic control system is being led by a surprise-pick contractor with little previous experience with the FAA.

And even though that contractor, Herndon, Virginia-based Peraton — which otherwise has a large national security portfolio — is getting good early reviews, some predict that the overhaul will take years to bear fruit.

“Even if they move at lightning speed, there won’t be that much done by 2028,” said a former FAA official, granted anonymity to candidly discuss the agency’s internal process, citing the scheduled end of President Donald Trump’s term.

Indeed, an industry official who works with the FAA and was granted anonymity to talk about Peraton’s budding relationship with the agency said that roles and responsibilities are still being defined and schedules still being worked out. “That’s a nice way of saying that they don’t really have a tremendous amount of familiarity with the FAA. I think they’re trying to figure out how they work with the FAA.”

The official acknowledged Peraton has “a very tough” job as the effort progresses.

Peraton declined comment for this story.

As the effort gets up to speed, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy is lobbying Congress for \$20 billion more in what the agency has dubbed the “Brand New Air Traffic Control System.” The project already got \$12.5 billion in last year’s GOP-led megalaw in what House Transportation Chair [Sam Graves](#) (R-Mo.) [described at the time](#) as a “down payment.”

But many in Congress say they want to see results before they pony up any additional money, with past modernization failures in mind —

chiefly the FAA's NextGen program, which faced [delays and cost overruns](#). And as the overhaul effort gets into full swing, some warn that political fights are certain as some FAA facilities get targeted for shuttering.



Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy tours Miami International Airport's air traffic control in March 2026. | @SecDuffy/X

Duffy is set to provide an update to the overhaul's progress Tuesday, in which he's expected to give a comprehensive, "behind the scenes breakdown of exactly how the Department is using the \$12.5 billion it received to remake our nation's antiquated air traffic control system," said DOT spokesperson Nathaniel Sizemore.

Officials from FAA and Peraton will walk through each part of the overhaul, Sizemore added, including how the system got to where it is, what has been done, what's ahead, plus the administration's new focus to avert past blunders like FAA's prior attempts to revamp its systems with more digital technologies. "We're doing this to avoid the mistakes of the past — like NextGen — where progress updates were few and far between," Sizemore said in an email.

The administration for months has been trumpeting various accomplishments in its FAA upgrades, including replacing nearly half of its copper telecommunications wiring with fiber, upgrading hundreds of radio sites and rolling out new technologies such as surface surveillance systems, voice switches, and electronic flight strips at 17 towers.

Additionally, DOT "conducts quarterly briefings with authorizers and monthly briefings with appropriators on this project," Sizemore said.

Of the \$20 billion in new money Duffy is seeking for the overhaul, about \$7 billion to \$10 billion will be dedicated toward software upgrades, [Duffy recently said on Fox News](#). In that Fox appearance, Duffy said \$12.5 billion will be spent within the next 2 1/2 years.

Painful past lessons

The hurdles are big — and memories are long — on previous failed efforts, headlined by the infamous NextGen program, which the FAA has dumped at least \$15 billion into. (The entire investment from FAA and the airline industry is [estimated around \\$36 billion](#).) The two-decade project to replace radar with satellite to track planes, among other changes, was plagued by delays, shifting requirements and uneven results.

"Over time, there was sort of mission creep, and people who wanted programs to be executed by FAA knew they could sort of lobby to have it added into NextGen," said the former FAA official. "So a lot of the delay and cost overruns came from the fact that it just grew over time."

That lesson to "guard against that mission creep" will need to hold steady if the FAA wants to stay the course to fix basic things. That kind of discipline will also be critical as the effort shift from planning to execution.

Dave Spero, national president of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists union, also cautioned that the best-laid plans can have their breakdowns. That's especially true for major contractors such as RTX (formerly Raytheon) and Indra, which earlier this year won contracts to [help replace](#) more than 600 ground-based radars. As contractors head out to radar and navigational facilities — some decades old — it's imperative that "they're engaging our technicians out in the field," said Spero.



FAA Air Traffic Controllers work in the Dulles International Airport Air Traffic Control Tower in Sterling, Va. | Cliff Owen/AP

Even the smallest details, he said, need to be documented, tracked and resolved as these facilities are modernized — helping the FAA to anticipate recurring issues and keep timelines on track.

Technicians "need to be a part of these installations because we know where all of the cable is buried," he said. "When you're installing a radar

out in the middle of nowhere, you could find out that it might have a rat infestation, or rattlesnakes or scorpions, or whatever it might be because that kind of stuff happens.”

Lastly, when the time comes to shutter facilities, it is all but certain to ignite a political fight.

For years, the agency has wanted to retire outdated equipment and facilities — costly to maintain — but the move remains politically sensitive and could lead to friction. For example, lawmakers complained in 2024 after the FAA moved responsibility for air traffic control overseeing operations in Newark, New Jersey from a facility in New York to one in Philadelphia. That change required moving roughly two dozen controllers.

These are “members of Congress that lose a lot of jobs in their states and districts,” said the former FAA official, “so whether you tackle those immediately or not, it’s unclear, but that’s where it really gets political.”

‘Tough task ahead’

Despite existing for less than a decade, Peraton has landed some impressive contracts. It helped power NASA’s deep space communications, including the [recent Artemis II](#) space mission. It has worked on stress-testing the [nation’s nuclear launch systems](#), and on [advancing research](#) that underpins Navy operations at sea.

Duffy, FAA Administrator Bryan Bedford and Deputy Administrator Chris Rocheleau have had nothing but positive things to say about the company in recent months, touting their collective optimism for the company’s past work. During [a fireside chat](#) with Punchbowl News last month, Duffy also cited Trump’s own enthusiasm for the company, which won some good will from the administration by meeting the president’s price point.

During the selection process, Trump called Peraton’s CEO Steve Schorer, Duffy said, saying the company should do the work for \$1.5 billion instead of \$1.7 billion. “Eight minutes later, Peraton called back and said they’d do it for 1.5 billion,” Duffy said at the event. So “we’ve saved a ton of money on this,” already, he said.

Despite the sunny words from the administration, the industry official said of Peraton, “I think they have a tough task ahead of them.”

He added, “It is a very tough job, without question, for what feels like a major modernization effort with contractors to move very, very fast and basically the FAA to not have an integrator that’s fully under its own two feet yet.” At this stage, “it’s hard to totally plan out what everything looks like.”

A recent FAA document, seen by POLITICO, said the agency would aim to conduct “site selection” this month for a new air route traffic control center. Last year’s GOP megalaw that included the \$12.5 billion for control upgrades included \$1.9 billion to build an ARTCC. Three existing ARTCCs somewhere in the U.S. — facilities that handle aircraft at higher altitudes — will be consolidated into this new facility.

“It seems like there are some elephants in the room, like facilities consolidation,” said the ex-FAA official.



Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) in March. He said he's been "impressed by the progress" with the overhaul. | Francis Chung/POLITICO

Good contenders, according to a second, former FAA official, granted anonymity to discuss FAA’s processes and air traffic patterns, would be regions that have these centers already, alongside strong performance records. Examples include Atlanta, Dallas Fort Worth, and Chicago, the official said.

Duffy has said that the \$12.5 billion in megalaw funding only scratches the surface of what needs to be done, both from the overall traffic management and radar installations. On Tuesday, he plans to reiterate “why additional funding is needed to fully overhaul the system for the

21st century,” said Sizemore, DOT’s spokesperson.

Some lawmakers have previously thrown cold water on throwing more money FAA’s way without a plan, most notably Senate Commerce Committee Chair [Ted Cruz](#) (R-Texas). On Wednesday, however, Cruz said he is pleased thus far.


“I’ve been impressed by the progress we’re seeing, and we need to see continued progress,” he said, but demurred on specifics. “That’s an ongoing conversation,” he told POLITICO. Sen. [Tammy Duckworth](#) (D-Ill.), ranking member on the Commerce’s aviation subpanel, also recently said there have been “broad updates” from FAA, but that the agency has relayed things are progressing on schedule. She reiterated her past stance that the agency will need more down the line, but “right now, they just need to execute the first 12[.5 billion] they’ve been given.”

Separately, DOT is set to choose companies that will automate terminal, en route, oceanic and surface operations by replacing fragmented legacy systems, aiming to create a unified platform to manage air traffic for them all.

“We’re in a great place,” Duffy said at the March event.

Still, Duffy cautioned that the work being done now will help to some extent but won’t be transformational. “[I]s it going to radically reduce your delays and cancellations? Well, a little bit, but not radically, because the efficiency in the airspace is going to come from a new software system.”

Duffy added, “It’s going to take us time to develop that.”

 [Sam Ogozalek contributed to this report.](#)

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