

FSS Modernization Plan

by LEW TOWNSEND / AOPA 376636

An intensive, but, to date, low-keyed and unpublicized, effort has been launched by AOPA officials to convince President Nixon, his budget people, and congressmen, that it is imperative for them to immediately fund and implement a four-year-old FAA-industry plan to reorganize, modernize, and greatly expand FAA's Flight Service Station (FSS) program [June 1967 PILOT, page 72].

Involved is a major upgrading of the FSS network, at only a slight increase over current annual costs, to make it better able to meet present and future civil aviation needs. Due primarily to the Federal Government's past concentration of talent and money on the airline segment of the overall air traffic system, FSS personnel and their facilities have emerged in recent years as the single most important FAA service provided the rank-and-file general aviation pilot and his passengers.

The FSS overhaul, officially called the "FSS Modernization Plan," basically would provide a nearly three-fold increase in the existing network of 307 FSSs in the conterminous United States. Some existing FSS facilities would be relocated; some would be decommissioned; and a large number of completely new facilities would be established at airports where such services are not now available.

Sparking redoubled efforts by AOPA officials in the FSS area was opposition, for the fourth straight year, by the White House's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and its predecessor agency, to inclusion of the necessary funds in the Administration's annual budget request to Congress to start the upgrading process.

In 1970, the OMB reportedly held the FAA funding request hostage, in order to force general aviation support for new and higher aviation "user taxes." The word at that time basically was that the only way FSS improvements could be programmed into the budget was for the Government to obtain new sources of revenue. The new and higher aviation "user taxes" were enacted. Payment of the taxes started July 1, 1970, but no FSS funds were included in a supplemental FAA budget to Congress that was submitted after the taxes were placed in force.

Funds for the FSS modernizing program were conspicuously missing again this year in Nixon's fiscal 1972 budget request that went to Congress January 29. Its lack of inclusion marked the latest in a string of annually broken promises and predictions made by FAA to general aviation and FSS employees that start of the upgrading program was imminent.

FAA reportedly requested, but was denied, a little more than \$6 million in this year's budget for the first year's cost of the program. FAA's total budget request, as approved by OMB and submitted to Congress, totaled nearly \$1.5 billion and included tens of millions of dollars to purchase additional sophisticated electronic gear for FAA to operate its IFR traffic control system.

At press time, FAA officials, in what amounted to a last-ditch appeal, said they were seeking a special audience with OMB officials to obtain permission to possibly "reprogram" some of their still-to-be-appropriated 1972 funds for the FSS modernization program.

Though not discounting the possible success of FAA's post-budget submission maneuver, AOPA officials said it appeared the most likely way that the nonairline segment of civil aviation was going to get anything in return for the increased Federal taxes it is paying was to take its case to Congress. They noted President Nixon said in his budget message that, in setting priorities for fiscal 1972, a major objective should be "to increase the role of private citizens and state and local governments in allocating our national resources," rather than letting the Federal Government "pre-empt resources."

"To us," said AOPA President J. B. Hartranft, Jr., "the President's words should be taken literally. Every pilot,

aircraft owner, manufacturer and supplier should take immediate steps to bluntly, but factually, inform FAA and elected representatives at all levels about general aviation and let them know they are sick and tired of continually being sent to the back of the bus each year when Federal administrators allocate available resources.

"Those same administrators last year told general aviation, 'When we start getting the money from the new user taxes, you'll see all kinds of improvements.' Well, we're having to pay those taxes now and we're still waiting for the first signs of improvements to the non-airline segments of air transportation."

Exhibiting AOPA's concern over possible delays again this year in getting the financially insignificant FSS modernization program started, Hartranft made a direct appeal to President Nixon. In a wire to the President, Hartranft said the program "is vital to the safety of the entire aviation community . . . We strongly urge that the FSS reorganization program receive the full support of your Administration."

Not the least of the services provided by FSSs to the nation's 700,000-plus general aviation pilots and their passengers, as well as to the airlines, are continuously updated aviation weather forecasts, pertinent information on conditions at distant airports and the operational status of navigation aids. The FSS system also represents the nation's basic in-flight communications network. Additionally, personnel manning FSSs assist in the location of lost aircraft plus help pilots who might become temporarily disoriented while in flight. Further, the FSSs represent an extensive, but little publicized, link in the National Weather Service's nationwide weather observations network.

AOPA is pushing, where possible, and pulling, where necessary, to get Flight Service Station system overhauled. Reorganization plan of 1967, which has been gathering dust at FAA, provides outline for improvements

The extent of problems created by past inattention and inadequate financing of the FSS network is well-documented, as are the potential benefits to be derived from modernizing and expanding that network. AOPA has learned that FAA Deputy Administrator Kenneth M. Smith and John L. Baker, FAA's new assistant administrator, Office of General Aviation Affairs, are cognizant of the FSSs' importance and have taken a personal hand in trying to get the modernization program under way. Department of Transportation (DOT), FAA's superior body, reportedly also has given its "full support" this year.

FAA officials have not yet made public a list of the proposed locations for FSS facilities under the modernization plan. This information has been carefully kept under wraps, even from inquiring congressmen. The PILOT, however, obtained a Government document that detailed the configuration of the FSS network as of the first of last year. It listed the proposed sites for all FSSs that would be manned by FAA personnel. A government official, who does not work for FAA but who has been associated with the plan's development and updating since last year, said the document, with only a few exceptions, accurately reflected the current list of sites where manned FSSs would be located.

Though declining to divulge the specific exceptions, the official said there were approximately 10 proposed FSS sites in the plan as of last year that have since been deleted. The proposed sites under the reorganization plan are listed in a separate article in this issue

[see page 98]. The various levels of manned FSSs that are proposed for each location are also shown, as well as those existing facilities that would be decommissioned.

AOPA's chief executive urged all pilots and aircraft owners to study the planned locations and analyze the potential benefits to their individual operations. They then should convey their views to FAA and appropriate elected representatives, with a request for immediate funding of the program, he added. "In order to adequately inform officials and allow them time to take appropriate action, these views should be forwarded immediately," Hartranft counseled.

Briefly stated, the reorganization and modernization plan would expand the existing network of 298 full-time and nine part-time FSSs in the "lower 48" states into a system of 155 full-time, 408 part-time, and 290-plus "unmanned" FSSs. The 155 full-time FSSs, practically all of which would be selected from existing facilities, would be centrally located in areas of concentrated general aviation activity. They would comprise the "hard core" of the future FSS network. These FSSs would take over many administrative-type duties now handled individually by each FSS. The full-time FSSs officially would be known as Level IV FSSs; part-time FSSs would be designated either Level II or Level III FSSs; and unmanned FSSs would be called Level I FSSs. The reorganization also would result in the "decombining" of all currently combined FSS and tower (C/ST) operations.

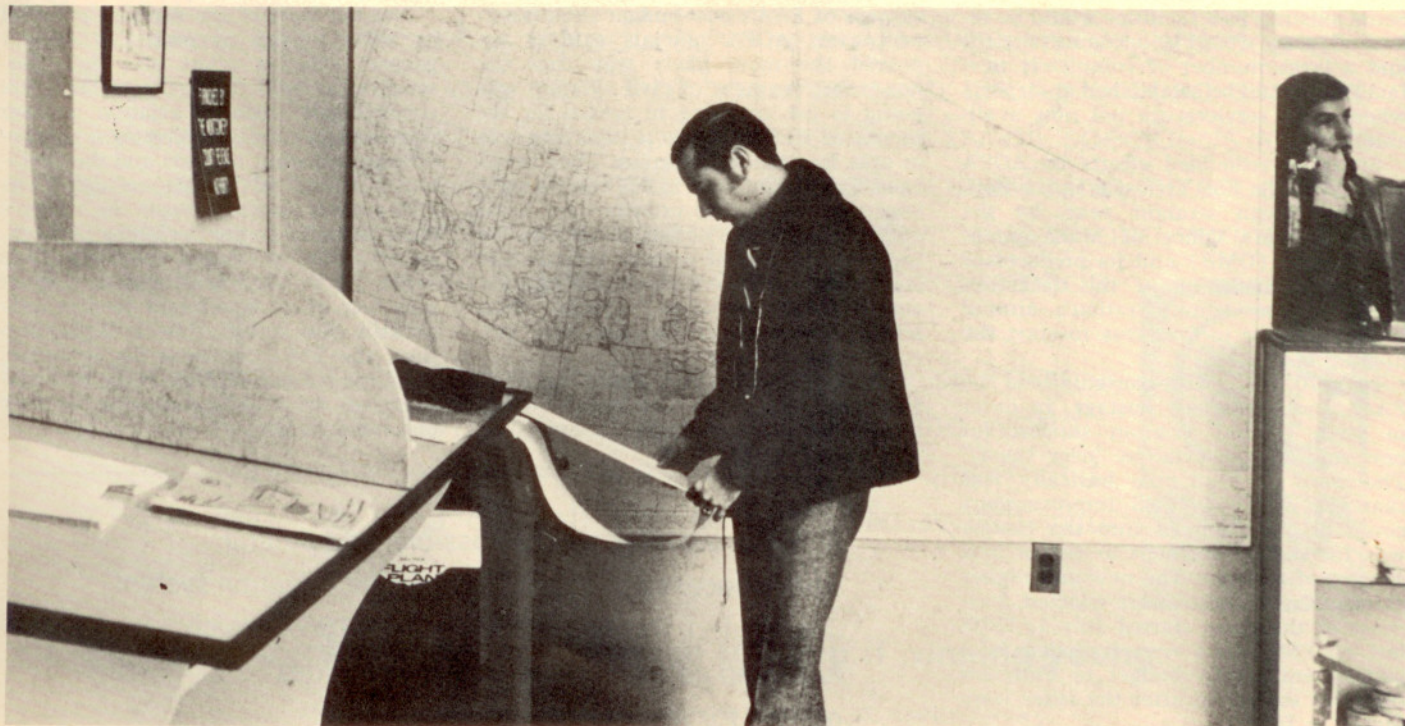
Level II and Level III FSSs, the part-

time facilities, normally would be manned by FAA air traffic specialists during the daylight hours from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. A 1969 FAA survey reportedly revealed that 96.5% of all general aviation flights are conducted between these hours. The 408 Level II and Level III FSSs in the plan would be located at airports surrounding the full-time Level IV FSSs and they would be fully equipped. Each Level IV FSS basically would have a group of Level II and Level III "satellite" FSSs under its jurisdiction. FAA officials said most of the existing FSS facilities that are not chosen as Level IV FSSs under the plan would become Level II or Level III FSSs. The list of proposed sites in a separate article in this issue supports this statement.

The 290-plus "unmanned" FSSs, or Level I facilities, would supplement the preceding network of manned FSSs. In essence, Level I FSSs would represent FAA equipment that is installed and maintained, but not manned, at airports with lower general aviation activity than that at airports selected for the higher level FSSs.

The proposed Level I FSSs are an outgrowth of FAA's seven-year-old "Airport Information Desks" (AID) test program. Initiated in 1964 and greeted with widespread pilot acceptance and praise [July 1965 PILOT, page 26; October 1964 PILOT, page 90], the AID program has resulted in the establishment of AIDs at 17 airports to date. These airports, which are identified in Part 3 of the Airman's Information Manual (AIM), are described as having the following: "A pilot self-help desk with flight planning material, weather instruments, telephone to an FSS and usually weather reports by teletypewriters." Robert V. Reynolds, former head of FAA's Office of General Aviation Affairs, recently

Robert A. Moore, Jr. (AOPA 252978), flight instructor for Freestate Aviation, Inc., Montgomery County (Md.) Airpark, checks weather while Freestate flight operations manager Michael R. Davis uses direct line to FAA facility at Baltimore's Friendship Airport. The airport installed its own pilot "self-help" facilities, after FAA said it had no money to provide them. FAA would install and maintain similar equipment at 290 low activity airports under proposed FSS modernization plan. PILOT staff photo



said general aviation should have "upwards to a thousand of these at various airports."

An important part of the FSS Modernization Plan involves the establishment, for the first time, of specific criteria under which airports might qualify for FSS facilities and services. The proposed criteria would allow airports to qualify for progressively higher levels of FSS facilities and services, i.e., first a Level I, then a Level II or Level III FSS, as their flight activities grow. By the same token, the criteria also would detail requirements for downgrading, or possibly even removing, FSS facilities and services at a given location, if flight activity fell below a certain mark.

Following is FAA's description of each type of FSS and the qualifying criteria now being considered:

Level IV FSSs—"Stations designated type IV will be those that can best perform the centralized system functions, such as en route communications, DF [direction-finding services], transcribed weather broadcasts, etc. Type IV stations should not be closer than 80 n.m. apart and must meet the criteria of being at an airport having at least 18,000 annual itinerant operations (10,000 for existing stations). Type IV FSSs [would] provide briefing and flight plan services for the local airport, for type I [Level I FSSs] and other leased telephone outlets, and for type II and III stations at night. At nontower airports they [would] provide airport advisory services.

"The system functions performed by the type IV stations include in-flight and emergency assistance services, search and rescue coordination, lake/mountain/island reporting service, transborder services, teletype relay, monitoring navigational aids, and security control functions. All type IV stations will have DF, and many will have weather facsimile and weather radar. Type IV FSSs will normally administer their type II and III satellites, and provide staffing relief for them."

Level II and Level III FSSs—"Type II and type III stations are essentially offices, conveniently accessible to general aviation pilots, which provide pre-flight briefings and flight plan service. The establishment criteria is 18,000 annual itinerant operations and a public instrument approach procedure. The distinction [between Level II and Level III FSSs] is that the type III station is located at a nontower airport and consequently provides airport advisory service. Type II and III stations are equipped with Service A and B teletype (send/receive), a transceiver for transmission on 123.6 [Level II FSSs will not have radio communications per AOPA's ATC Department.—Ed.] and a briefing desk. Most of these facilities will also take local weather observations and administer airman examinations. Depending on the level of activity, they may be equipped with weather facsimile and weather surveillance radar display equipment.

"Most type II and III stations will be staffed with only three specialists, but



R. J. Christiansen, chief, Cedar City (Utah) FSS, explains operation of direction-finding (DF) equipment used in assisting pilots who become disoriented while in flight. Located on the Cedar City Municipal Airport, the FSS would become one of 155 full-time Level IV FSSs under updating program. All Level IV FSSs would be equipped with DFs under the program. Photo courtesy of Cedar City FSS

a few busy type II stations may require considerably more. The stations will operate only during busy hours, i.e., when demand equals 10 or more flight services per hour. We expect some stations to operate 12 to 16 hours per day. When the FSS is closed, telephone calls will automatically be directed to the controlling type IV station, which will handle the nighttime briefing and flight plan workload."

Level I FSSs—"Airports having between 7,500 and 18,000 annual itinerant general aviation operations will be eligible for a type I FSS. The airport management, or fixed-base operator, must agree to operate the station. If he does not wish to do so, the airport will still be eligible for a leased telephone line to the nearest type IV FSS. If a type I station is established, the FAA will furnish a Service A weather teletype printer, wind and altimeter indicator instruments, and a telephone to the type IV FSS. The operator will be expected to keep current weather data posted to permit pilots to brief themselves and to provide local weather observations at the request of the associated type IV station. After business hours, the leased telephone line will remain available for briefings and for filing or closing flight plans."

The preceding descriptions of the three proposed types of FSSs, along with interviews of various FAA officials, revealed several changes have been made in the basic modernization plan first

agreed to by the 1967 FAA-industry group. While most of the changes involved a shuffling of the numbers, primarily a reduction in the total number of FSSs to be in the program and an increase in the qualifying number of itinerant operations, there have been two major modifications to the original concept of the program.

In an arbitrary and unpublicized move last year, FAA officials excluded privately owned airports from being able to compete for the FSS services. AOPA noted this arbitrary action was in contradiction to recent recommendations from the National Bureau of Standards that FAA immediately reverse its historical discriminatory policy of limiting its responsibilities and resources to publicly owned airports [January PILOT, page 40]. A reversal of this policy was endorsed by practically every major aviation organization and a large number of key FAA officials. AOPA's chief executive reported Association officials would seek a return to the original FSS improvement plan to allow both publicly owned and privately owned airports to qualify under the program.

Second major modification made by FAA officials to the program was in the recommended timespan for completing the modernization and expansion program. This also involved a unilateral decision by FAA, without consultation or endorsement by industry representatives. In 1967, FAA and industry officials unanimously agreed the modernization



Mullan Pass (Idaho) FSS, which FAA said is one of only two remaining FSSs in the "lower 48" not located on an airport, would be decommissioned under proposed reorganization plan. Zuni (N.M.) FSS, located on an Indian reservation, is the other facility, according to FAA officials. It too would be shut down. Photo courtesy of Mullan Pass FSS

program was long overdue and should be completed within four years, or sooner. Subsequently, it was changed to a five-year program. The aviation community officially will learn next month that it now is planned as a 10-year program.

Detailed information on the current status of the FSS modernization program, with the possible exception of a confirmation of the specific sites involved, will be officially presented by FAA at next month's annual National Aviation System Planning Review Conference in Washington, D.C. The conference, to be held April 26-29, is used by FAA to brief the aviation community on the agency's annually updated 10-year master plan and to seek comments from interested parties.

A draft of the 10-year master plan that was to be presented at the conference showed the modernization program would now be carried out in three "phases." During Phase I, from fiscal 1972 through fiscal 1975, the FSS network would be reshaped into 155 Level IV FSSs, 165 Level II and Level III FSSs, and 40 Level I FSSs. Phase II, which would not start until fiscal 1976 and would run through fiscal 1978, would see the overall network further expanded to 155 Level IV FSSs, 378 Level II and Level III FSSs, and 220 Level I FSSs. The third and final phase, from fiscal 1979 through fiscal 1981, would complete the modernization and expansion program to provide a total of 155 Level IV FSSs, 408 Level II and Level III FSSs, and 290 Level I FSSs.

AOPA officials said they were disappointed over the attempt to stretch the planned improvements out over a 10-

year period, especially in view of what they termed unwarranted delays in the past. They emphasized, however, that their prime objective would be to get the program under way immediately and avoid further delays. Efforts also would be made to obtain accelerated funding and implementation, they said.

Regarding actual dollars involved, the draft of FAA's 10-year master plan showed the following amounts were to be sought by FAA for FSS facilities and equipment to carry out the modernization program: fiscal 1972, \$6 million; fiscal 1973, \$11.6 million; fiscal 1974, \$13.2 million; fiscal 1975, \$9.6 million; fiscal 1976, \$10.4 million; and fiscal 1977 through fiscal 1981, \$23 million. In addition, the master plan showed FAA planned to request a combined total of \$9.8 million for FSS research and development from fiscal 1972 through fiscal 1981.

William R. Kraham, executive director, National Association of Air Traffic Specialists (NAATS), voiced concern over the lack of funds for the program in the pending budget request and the time period now planned to carry it out. A member of the 1967 FAA-industry group that worked on the initial plan, Kraham contended the FSS system required an immediate personnel increase "of at least 1,700 air traffic control specialists to meet current demands." He further noted that no funds were provided to improve the system during the past two fiscal years, then added, "Over and above the long-range plans for modernization of the entire system, there is an immediate and most urgent need to implement improvements today. Staffing, training, equipment, facilities, and

a more equitable grade structure commensurate with responsibility, head a list of needs that can and must be accomplished now." NAATS states it represents about 2,500 of the 4,214 FAA employees that were assigned to the FSS program as of Oct. 31, 1970.

Edward Chlapowski, vice president, DOT Council of Locals, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), echoed Kraham's concern. Chlapowski is an active air traffic specialist at the Billings, Mont., FSS. "They're not intending to do anything more during the next four or five years than what they've been doing the past 10 years," he charged. "And what they've been doing in the past is closing down smaller stations and opening up bigger ones. I just don't think this is what the private pilot really wants or needs. He wants more FSSs at more locations and he wants and needs them now, not in 1981."

FAA's Air Traffic Service (ATS), which controls FSS activities, has been less than active in the past in seeking FSS improvements. Up until last year, ATS did not even have a separate branch in its Washington, D.C., headquarters to look after and assist those operating and using the FSS network. In an obvious reaction to threats by FSS employees that they might adopt a militant stance, similar to that successfully employed by air traffic controllers working in towers and Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCC), ATS created an "FSS Operations and Procedures Branch" in 1970. Creation of the new branch reportedly placed the FSS system and its requirements on a more equal footing at FAA headquarters with the other two major traffic control systems—the 21 ARTCCs and the 331 FAA-operated towers. William H. Boatright, a veteran FSS employee, was named chief of the new FSS branch.

FAA's 4,214 FSS employees compares with 10,835 assigned to the 21 ARTCCs and 8,588 detailed to operate and manage the 331 FAA towers. Primary purpose of ARTCCs, of course, is to provide radar separation between aircraft flying under instrument flight rules. Only about 3% of all general aviation itinerant operations are handled by the IFR system, according to AOPA.

Ultimate fate of the FSS modernization plan depends, in part, on a continuation of FAA's current interest in getting the program under way. It also depends upon the support and pressure that might be generated, collectively and individually, by pilots and aircraft owners on FAA and elected representatives. In its current form, the plan is not perfect and has a number of deficiencies that need to be corrected, according to AOPA officials. They said, however, that the modernization plan should be funded this year, without further delays. For the Nixon Administration and Congress to do less, they implied, would be a brutal exhibition of total disregard for the current and future safety of the entire aviation community, especially the general aviation pilot and his passengers. □