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U.S. Airlines Try to Abandon Passenger Rights and Performance Reports —to Secretly Police Themselves

Red alert! Airline lobbyists are pressuring regulators to abandon your protections as a customer. Will the Trump administration do their bidding?



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Published: Sep 02, 2025

Updated: Sep 04, 2025



The nation's largest airlines are quietly asking the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) to virtually eradicate every meaningful consumer protection we have. If the big carriers get their way, you may never see a cash refund again or be able to decipher the cost of baggage fees in the future.

It's nothing short of a frontal assault on airline customers.

The sheer breadth of the airlines' regulatory "wish list" is mind-blowing. This is despite the United States already **lagging behind dozens of other countries** on passenger rights.

Stealth lobbying to reverse your airline rights

This all began on April 2, when the DOT **opened a docket** seeking comments through May 5 on "Ensuring Lawful Governance and Implementation of the President's 'Department of Government Efficiency' Deregulatory Agenda."

There was no press release and virtually no media attention, but within the airline industry, that action resonated like a starting gun.



Then the industry group Airlines for America (A4A) **filed 93 pages of mind-blowing suggestions** for the Trump administration on behalf of only the biggest and most powerful carriers. Airlines for America **represents the big guys**, not the low-fare airlines that compete with them.

This group spent **\$5.7 million last year** lobbying for the largest carriers, including **the Big Three**—American, Delta, United—along with Southwest, Alaska-Hawaiian, and JetBlue.

Little wonder A4A was "**thrilled**" when Sean Duffy was nominated as DOT Secretary—**Duffy himself lobbied** in the private sector for the same Big Three in 2020.

Unfortunately, the dreams of the biggest airlines are your nightmares.

The list from hell: What U.S. airlines are trying to do

Buried in those 93 pages is an endless list of terrible ideas:

- Imagine that **you'll have no idea which airline has the most complaints**, or how many **flights are delayed**, or whether or not **cancellations** are increasing or decreasing.

That's what A4A wants.

The DOT's monthly **Air Travel Consumer Report** is virtually the only independent yardstick for industry performance statistics such as flight delays, cancellations, consumer complaints, mishandled baggage, bumping, and problems related to the disabled and animals. (The ATCR was launched in 1985, but actually dates to 1971 under the now-defunct Civil Aeronautics Board; currently these reports are **archived back to 1998**.)

A4A wants to muzzle that report. "To save the American taxpayer from unnecessary costs and bureaucracy, the DOT should limit this report to that information required by statute."

You won't know which carriers are ripping passengers off every month.

- A4A wants to abandon the **cash refund rules for canceled or significantly delayed flights**.

In April 2024, then-DOT Secretary Pete Buttigieg **announced the biggest win** for airline passengers in a generation. At long last, we have mandatory refunds for flights that are long-delayed or cancelled. (I should know: **I introduced him** at that press conference.)

But A4A calls this "a gross example of Federal overreach"—**despite bipartisan support from Congress** for the same rules in the 2024 FAA Reauthorization Act.

A4A also makes the laughable claim it is "committed" to refunds, despite the fact that, as Senators noted, airlines **"sat on" \$10 billion in refunds** during Covid.

- The airlines want to **avoid warning you about extra fees, too**.

The Biden/Buttigieg administration also took long-needed action on **providing junk fee transparency**, with the simple goal of making sure you have full fare and fee data *when you start* booking.

Last year, A4A and individual member airlines promptly **sued DOT over this action**, a suit that's still pending. Imagine spending millions of dollars to prevent your customers from knowing how much their trip will cost!

So it's no surprise A4A's suggestions include abandoning fee transparency. Airlines for America also makes the false claim that DOT overstepped its **"unfair and deceptive practices" authority** in ending opaque pricing.

Seriously? What could possibly be more unfair *and* deceptive than not telling travelers the full price of their trip in advance?

- A4A also calls for **ending the fair family seating policy**.

For a decade now, the big airlines have fought against multiple mandates from Congress and the DOT that say the airlines can't charge families extra money to sit with their kids under the age of 13.

A4A now calls for abandoning the Biden/Buttigieg guidance on family seating, despite DOT reporting that A4A members Delta, Southwest, and United still **do not guarantee adjacent seats** at no extra cost.

It seems obvious and logical that an airline shouldn't make a parent pay to sit with their child, but that's another rule they want Trump's administration to kill.

I detailed my own involvement in this issue at length [here in August 2024](#).



- What else? Well, how about A4A wanting to **hide economy class seat size information**?
- And A4A wants to force disabled passengers to notify airlines in advance of their travel plans, thus **violating the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of interstate travel as a fundamental right**.
- A4A also wants Trump's staff to **terminate the DOT's Memoranda of Understanding** with state attorneys general to jointly address airline passenger complaints.

Never mind that ever since the draconian **federal preemption "liability shield"** clause in 1978, U.S. air travelers have had fewer rights with airlines than any other industry. Gee, I wonder why big airlines



don't want states to assist in policing their bad behavior!

All 93 pages of the government filing contain even more proposals as bad as these—and the airlines just might get what they wish for.

Urgent call to protect airline passenger rights

That quick deadline for public comment came and went very quietly, but my organization, American Economic Liberties Project, along with other consumer advocates, will be filing comments with the DOT's consumer protection staff.

And air travelers can always be heard too—but only if you speak up.

Click here to find [contact info for the DOT](#) (including phone and mail).

Are decades of progress going to be undone because of deep-pocketed lobbyists?

If the airlines get their way, your protections will vanish and they will operate under new levels of secrecy: No idea which flights are often delayed. No refunds for poor performance. No warning about junk fees. No information about mishandled luggage. And more.

So let your voice be heard as well.

Editor's update to this story: On September 4, 2025, the **White House announced** that it **would not enforce the rule** that requires carriers to pay compensation to passengers for flight disruptions caused by the airlines, a right that is enjoyed by **travelers in many other countries**. On the same day, the DOT announced it is "considering rescinding regulations issued under Biden in April 2024 that required airlines and ticket agents to disclose service fees alongside airfares to help consumers avoid unnecessary or unexpected fees," according to Reuters. In a public statement, Airlines for America praised the moves.

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Which U.S. government agency is being targeted by airline lobbyists to change consumer protections?

☐ Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

☐ U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)

☐ Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

☐ Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

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