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**Edgar can't get his plan off the ground**

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SPRINGFIELD-Building a major new airport near Peotone seemed simple back in 1994, when Republicans swept control of the Legislature and Gov. Edgar was re-elected to a second term.

That proposed airport was one of the governor's main initiatives and suburban Republicans, such as Senate President James "Pate" Philip (R-Wood Dale) and House Speaker Lee Daniels (R-Elmhurst), had lobbied hard for the project as a means to siphon off air traffic and jet noise from congested O'Hare Airport.

But when it came to advancing the idea during the last two years, nothing happened in the General Assembly.

Now, Edgar's pet building project exists on political life-support, wounded by relentless attacks from major airlines and business groups that successfully have driven a wedge into the Republican Party on this issue.

That lack of GOP unity has posed major problems in the Legislature because most Democratic lawmakers have followed Mayor Daley's cue against Peotone.

"Truthfully, we should be able to get this through," said state Sen. Marty Butler (R-Park Ridge), a leading third-airport supporter. "But there are all shades of Republicans on this question."

As state transportation officials prepare to release what may be the last study on the proposed south suburban airport, some Republicans have begun sounding the death knell for Peotone.

Last Thursday, DuPage County Board Chairman Gayle Franzen told regional planners in Chicago that Peotone never would materialize because it would hurt O'Hare and thus dry up business in the northwest and west suburbs.

And Downstate Republican lawmakers haven't bought Edgar's assurances that a Peotone airport won't drain precious road and bridge money from the state treasury -- a contention the Air Transport Association, which opposes the plan, made in a series of spring television and newspaper ads.

"I don't want to see Downstate dollars going into that third airport," said state Rep. John Jones (R-Mount Vernon), who represents far southeastern Illinois.

No airline has said it is willing to use and help pay for the Peotone airport, a necessity since the governor has pledged not to use state dollars to build the project.

"We think there is a need for a third airport, and the south suburbs make the most sense," Edgar said. "But that doesn't mean we can make it a reality. It's going to have to have private dollars and federal dollars."

Edgar wants to see how airlines react to a financial study to be released in the next few weeks by state-hired consultants. That report is expected to show a lower cost for the airport if it is built in phases, perhaps offering an enticement for airlines shut out of the Chicago market by American and United airlines' enormous presence.

Few who have followed the airport debate believe one more study will turn the tide.

"There are rooms full of paper studies. But not a spade full of dirt has been turned," said Joseph Karaganis, an attorney for the Suburban O'Hare Commission, a coalition of northwest and west suburban mayors pushing a third Chicago area airport. "The only thing that most people can conclude is there is a lack of political will to accomplish this."