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**New Law Clears the Way for Airports to Drop T.S.A. Screeners**

**By** [**RON NIXON**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/n/ron_nixon/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

WASHINGTON — A new law makes it easier for airports to replace federal screeners with private contractors, and several airports, after years of passenger complaints, are lining up to make the change.

The law was welcome news to Larry Dale, president and chief executive of Orlando Sanford International Airport, who said his airport’s request to opt out of using [Transportation Security Administration](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/t/transportation_security_administration/index.html?inline=nyt-org) officers last year was denied by the federal government.

Mr. Dale said his desire to use private screeners in place of T.S.A. personnel was motivated by hundreds of complaints from passengers, and added that he had his own problems with the agency’s screeners.

“We’ve visited a number of airports who have opted out of the T.S.A. screenings, and no one wants to go back,” Mr. Dale said. “We think this will be more efficient and customer-friendly for us.”

Since 2001, a little-known law has let airports seek permission to stop using federal screeners. But airport officials said that the T.S.A had been slow in allowing the switch, and last year the agency said it would stop accepting additional requests.

That angered Representative John L. Mica, Republican of Florida, whose district includes the Orlando Sanford airport. Mr. Mica, the chairman of the House [transportation](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/t/transportation/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) committee, included a provision in aviation legislation strengthening the ability of airports to use private screeners. The law passed last month.

A committee report found that private contractors could be more cost-effective than federal screeners. If the nation’s top 35 airports switched to private contractors, the report said, taxpayers would save $1 billion over five years.

In its own report last year, the agency estimated that private screeners would cost 3 percent more than federal ones. The Government Accountability Office, an investigative arm of Congress, said the agency had overstated the financial benefits of using its own workers.

Douglas R. Laird, an aviation security consultant in Reno, Nev., said it was difficult to say whether T.S.A. officers had made air travel safer compared with private screeners.

“My gut feeling that it is a little bit better, but the jury is still out,” Mr. Laird said, referring to the T.S.A. “But it does cost more. So is it worth the additional dollars? I haven’t seen any empirical data that shows that it is.”

Justin Harclerode, a spokesman for the House transportation committee, said the T.S.A.’s studies showed that the use of private contractors did not pose a security risk.

“They exceeded or provided the same level of security as T.S.A. screeners,” he said.

Sixteen of the nation’s 450 airports use private contractors, including larger ones like San Francisco International Airport as well as smaller ones like Jackson Hole Airport in Wyoming.

Those that want to leave the agency’s screening program must prove to the federal government that contractors are more cost-effective and would not be detrimental to security. The private screeners have to follow T.S.A. guidelines and fall under its supervision, although the agency will not conduct private screeners’ training. The T.S.A. will pay for the private screeners.

Officials at some of nation’s busiest airports, including in the New York and Washington areas, said they had no desire to change.

Airlines or airports used to have private security companies to screen passengers. But questions were raised in 2001, after the attacks of Sept. 11, and federal inquires found that many private companies had hired untrained security guards. The T.S.A. was established, taking over screening at all airports.

The agency said it did not expect a flood of applications requesting a change to private screeners. It said it had 28 applications pending, which included just two since new law was approved last month.

The agency has grown less and less popular since it was created as passengers told horror stories about screenings by the workers. Earlier this year, it had to defend itself after stopping a passenger at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas who tried to board a plane with a cupcake packaged in a jar. The agency said the icing on the cupcake was considered a gel and exceeded the amount allowed in carry-on luggage.

The agency’s decision to use full-body scanners at many airports also brought a negative reaction amid concerns of radiation exposure, although the T.S.A says the machines are safe.