

Lawmakers seek investigation of Amtrak executives

By Jim McElhatton

Three senior Republican lawmakers are calling for an investigation on whether to fire a pair of top Amtrak executives in the wake of a report accusing the rail service of getting rid of its inspector general after he uncovered waste and abuse in the top reaches of the company.

In a letter Thursday to Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, the lawmakers accuse Amtrak Chairman Thomas Carper and General Counsel Eleanor Acheson of "unlawfully" interfering with the independence of the taxpayer-funded company's inspector general, who is charged with rooting out corruption and mismanagement.

The letter cites a report released earlier this month by a pair of congressional Republicans that concluded Amtrak never told Congress last year it forced out former longtime inspector general Fred Weiderhold, despite a law requiring prior notice.

The report, released by Sen. Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, and Darrell Issa of California, ranking member of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, also stated that Mr. Weiderhold was targeted because of his "effective track record of exposing waste, fraud and abuse at the highest levels within Amtrak."

The Republican lawmakers and John Mica of Florida, ranking member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, signed a letter Thursday sent to Mr. LaHood calling on him to review the actions of Mr. Carper and Ms. Acheson to determine whether they should be fired.

"The unlawful actions of Chairman Carper and (General Counsel) Acheson impeded the effectiveness of Amtrak's OIG to such an extent that we intend to ask for their removal pending an independent investigation by the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Transportation."

Mr. Mica, who called for an investigation of Amtrak's legal expenses in 2005, said the "pattern of mismanagement" at Amtrak was "unprofessional and possibly in violation of the law."

Amtrak officials did not immediately respond to the letter from the lawmakers Thursday, but in a statement earlier this month responding to the congressional report, the company defended its actions concerning Mr. Weiderhold.

"The Amtrak board is committed to having an independent Office of Inspector General that operates under best practices consistent with the Inspector General Act and, as previously stated, was concerned for some time about whether best practices were in use," Amtrak officials said in the statement.

Amtrak also stated that a "full and fair reading" of the information that officials turned over to congressional investigators "confirms important facts and circumstances regarding the retirement of its former [inspector general] and demonstrates Amtrak acted appropriately."