

TRANSPORT

Ottawa takes heat on airfare fees

NOT DISCLOSED

By SCOTT DEVEAU

The federal government is being called upon to explain why an amendment to the Canadian Transportation Act, which passed through Parliament last summer and would force Canadian airlines to divulge all fees, costs and taxes in the advertised price of airfares, has not been enacted.

The issue of hidden fees has been thrust to the forefront this week after Canada's two largest carriers each implemented a new "fuel surcharge," which is not being included in the advertised price of a ticket.

Under federal law, the airlines are not obligated to detail the new fees in advertisements, in the same way they are not obligated to do so with security charges, airport-improvement fees and other charges passed on to passengers, according to a spokesman for the Canadian Transportation Agency.

However, last summer, Parliament passed a series of amendments to the Canadian Transportation Act, which received royal assent and included, among other things, a section that would force airlines to advertise the full price of tickets, including "all fees, charges and taxes."

However, no fixed date was attached for when it would come into effect, giving the government time to consult with various parties because some co-ordination was required between the federal government, which regulates airfares advertised by airlines, and provincial governments, which regulate those by travel agents.

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'Get busy' on hidden fees, Volpe tells Ottawa

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The amendment "will come into force on the future date to be fixed by order" of the government, the amendment states.

Joe Volpe, the Liberal transport critic, yesterday called on Lawrence Cannon, the federal Transport Minister, to appear before a federal committee tomorrow to explain when that date will be and "why they have not accomplished what they were suppose to accomplish."

If he fails to appear, Mr. Volpe said he would drag the airlines in as early as Tuesday to explain what has been done.

"Your ticket prices just went up by \$60 in one direction, \$120 in two directions," he said. "It imposes an obligation on government to get busy."

Mr. Cannon did not comment yesterday after repeated calls to his office.

In the face of soaring oil prices, Canada's largest carries implemented the new charge this past week, which ranges from \$40 to \$120 for a round-trip ticket, depending on the carrier and the distance.

Air Canada and Porter Airlines say they won't include the surcharge in the advertised price of tickets, while WestJet Airlines Ltd. said it would make the price of the surcharges "visible" on its print advertisements by the end of the week, but not include it in the advertised price.

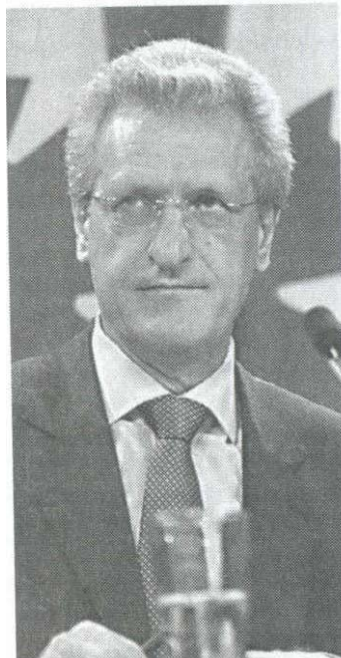
As it stands, however, the new fee only appears in a pull-down menu on their Web sites or on the final receipt before purchase.

"We will happily abide by

whatever regulations the government establishes, provided those rules apply equally and fairly to all airlines," said Peter Fitzpatrick, Air Canada spokesman. "We just want to see a level playing field."

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Joe Volpe, Liberal transport critic, is urging Ottawa to make good on its promise of airline-fee transparency.