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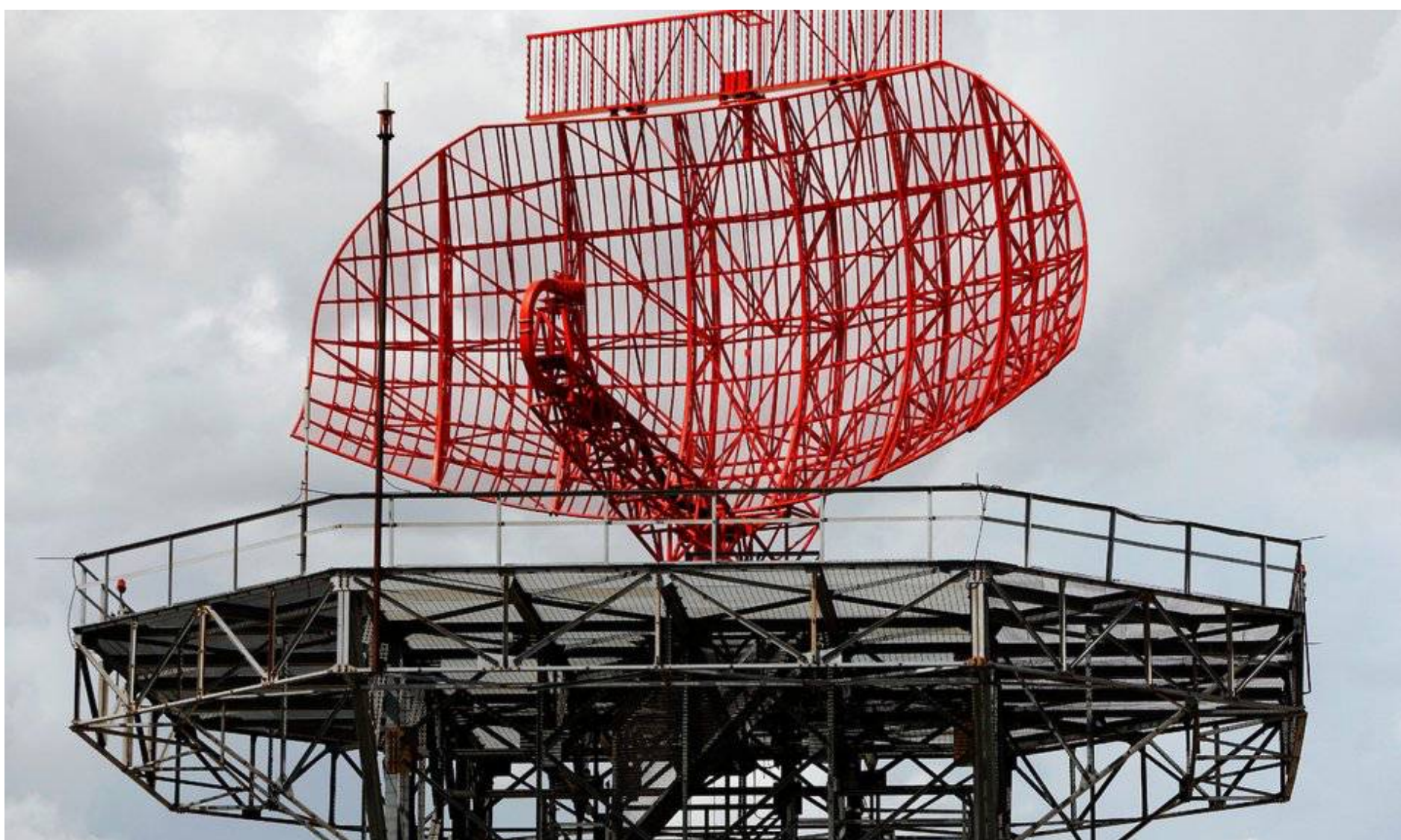
## Air traffic control academy closes in Oklahoma City as partial government shutdown drags on



by **JUSTIN WINGERTER**

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A radar at the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center, Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2010. Photo by Jim Beckel, The Oklahoman ORG XMIT: KOD

Around the water coolers and in the hallways of the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center this week, federal employees, many of them working without any promise of pay after Jan. 1, have discussed a political impasse more than 1,000 miles away in Washington.

“It's not so much partisan or anything,” said Adrian Bland, a terminal instrument procedures specialist for the Federal Aviation Administration. “We don't care who's in office and who's running the administration, we just want this to be done.”

Bland is one of 593 federal employees at the south Oklahoma City center who is working without pay, too critical to the nation's airways to be among 1,146 employees there who have been furloughed as part of a partial government shutdown that entered its eighth day Saturday. An untold number of contractors at the center also have been furloughed.

“We're going to have one more paycheck, this coming Tuesday. Beyond that, we don't know what we'll have,” said Bland, who has worked at the FAA for nearly a decade after 22 years with the Air Force. “For most normal people, who live paycheck to paycheck, you don't know if you can make your daughter's tuition payment or pay your electricity bill.”

President Donald Trump and congressional Democrats have failed to reach an agreement on border security funding, leaving a quarter of federal agencies unfunded, including the FAA. The FAA Academy at the Monroney Center, which trains air traffic controllers from around the world, is now closed.

Paul Rinaldi, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, says the academy's closure will cut the number of air traffic controllers in 2019, exacerbating a nationwide staffing shortage. The number of controllers in the U.S. is at a 30-year low and one in five are eligible to retire.

“This staffing crisis is negatively affecting the national airspace system, and the shutdown almost certainly will make a bad situation worse,” said Rinaldi, whose union represents 330 furloughed employees at the Monroney Center. “Even before the shutdown, controllers have needed to work longer and harder to make up for the staffing shortfall.”

The academy is not one of several offices at the Monroney Center deemed too critical to close. In October, Congress passed an amendment preventing the Aircraft Registry Office there from closing during government shutdowns. The office employs 109 people.

Sen. Jim Inhofe, a Tulsa Republican who pushed the amendment, blamed Democrats for the current shutdown and claimed it should have only “a minor impact” on Oklahomans.

“That isn't to say that the partial shutdown is a light matter — it isn't — but essential services will continue, some agencies will operate with reserve funds and the Senate acted last week to ensure furloughed employees would be paid,” he said.

“However, if the Democrats, after several good-faith efforts, insist on continuing to play politics at the expense of border security and vital agencies, we may see greater impacts in the New Year.”

Sen. James Lankford, an Oklahoma City Republican and frequent critic of the federal appropriations process, said border security funds and money for all agencies had bipartisan support earlier this year.

"I have spent hours on the phone and meeting face-to-face to try to keep the government open," Lankford said Friday. "We should be able to secure our borders and fund the government. There is no reason for the shutdown to drag on."

Though the Monroney Center has been hardest hit, it's not the only federal office in Oklahoma City affected by the shutdown. Transportation Security Administration workers at Will Rogers World Airport are not being paid and Internal Revenue Service employees at a downtown office have been furloughed.

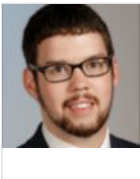
“This means your friends and neighbors in Oklahoma City who work for the federal government are not getting paid and it is not their fault,” said Tony Reardon, president of the National Treasury Employees Union, which represents IRS workers. “They are middle class and they have bills to pay, just like everyone else.”

Bland, a single father with a daughter in medical school, has begun taking a closer look at his spending. He knows a paycheck will arrive Jan. 1 but doesn't know if another will be there Jan. 15 or Jan. 29 or beyond.

“I won't make any long-term commitments — or even short term, two or three weeks out — because I don't know,” he said. “I have a sufficient amount of savings to sustain me, yes, but who's to say if this could last two months, three months? That may stretch beyond my savings.”

Most of all, however, he worries about the unseen system of highways in the sky that he helps oversee. The aviation safety inspectors he typically works in concert with — people who, for example, certify a runway is safe to land on — are now furloughed. The once-continual exchange of aviation data between Bland and inspectors at airports across the country is now broken.

“That could, potentially, cause a problem,” he said. “Now, there's redundant systems and things that we do to mitigate that, but that is a problem.”



**JUSTIN WINGERTER**

Justin Wingerter is the federal government reporter for The Oklahoman, covering the state's congressional delegation, Oklahomans in Washington and the effect of the federal government on Oklahoma....

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