

Fixed-Wing

USAF seeks \$329m for single 737 VIP transport amid cuts to fighter procurement

By Jan Tegler | 22 May 2024



Inconspicuous among the volumes of the US Air Force's (USAF's) fiscal year 2025 budget request is a line item for "C-40 fleet expansion", describing the modification of a single industry-standard business aircraft with features including the secure communications suite already present on eight of the service's executive transport aircraft.

Costing nearly \$329 million, the Boeing 737-based C-40D will be the newest aircraft dedicated to supporting the "top five users" – the USA's vice-president, first spouse, secretary of state, secretary of defense and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, according to the air force.

It will join a fleet of four 737-based C-40Bs and four 757-derived C-32As equipped with the Senior Leader Communications System-Airborne suites currently used for the mission.



Source: US Air Force

The USAF operates 11 737-based C-40s, including four C-40Bs it uses primarily to transport the vice-president, first spouse, secretary of state, secretary of defense and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff

The USAF says it will acquire the jet to address a shortfall in airlift capacity for those individuals.

"While C-40B aircraft can be used as back ups for top-five missions, these aircraft also serve other primary customers, including combatant commanders," the USAF says, adding that its C-32As "primarily support the top-five customers".

Operating that fleet of "four aircraft to support five customers every day, in addition to meeting depot maintenance and modification installation schedules, plus additional surge requirements, means that there are missions a C-32A aircraft won't be able to fulfill", the USAF says.

The C-32A is the militarised, executive transport version of the 757-200. The four now in service were acquired beginning in 1998. The C-40 is the US military's version of the 737-based Boeing Business Jet (BBJ). The USAF has 11 C-40s, which began entering service in late 2002. That fleet comprises the four C-40Bs and seven C-40Cs, which lack the communications suites and are used to transport members of the president's cabinet and Congress. The USAF puts the C-40's unit cost at \$70 million.

The service says requirements for the new-build C-40D executive airlift procurement "are still being coordinated and finalised". It is possible the jets will be based on Boeing's new 737 Max 7 or Max 8. That programme has been under intense scrutiny due to nagging safety and quality concerns – issues that prompted Boeing this year to significantly slow production, resulting in ongoing and lengthy delivery delays.

According to Cirium's Values Analyzer, new Max 8 BBJs with standard executive cabins are worth \$111-124 million, meaning the C-40D will be roughly three times more expensive.

The USAF is seeking to acquire the single C-40D at the same time it wants to trim acquisition of combat aircraft due to fiscal constraints. The service aims to acquire 42 Lockheed Martin F-35As an 18 Boeing F-15EX in FY2025, six fewer of each than previously planned, according to the budget request.



Source: US Air Force

The USAF also operates four C-32s, which are militarised 757-based executive transports

That reduction comes even as the US military insists it must be better prepared for threats in the Asia-Pacific region, where China is rapidly expanding its military capabilities.

Neither the Commercial Derivative Aircraft Division at Tinker AFB (which will manage the C-40D programme), the office of the Secretary of Defense nor the office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff responded to questions seeking more detail about the service's fleet strategy.

Asked to comment, the USAF says it "balances all Department of Defense and United States Air Force priorities to establish the budget".

The service has not disclosed details about its desired C-40D contract structure with Boeing, including whether it might seek a fixed-price agreement.

Boeing has in recent years struggled mightily under its fixed-price military deals, logging billions of dollars in charges against the programmes amid delays and cost overruns. Its fixed-price programmes include the KC-46 aerial refueller, T-7A jet trainer, MQ-25 carrier-based autonomous refueller and the new 747-derived VC-25B, the Air Force One replacement. Boeing has said it seeks to move away from fixed-price deals.

"The acquisition strategy is currently in development and completion is expected later this year," says the USAF of the C-40D programme.

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