NEW ORLEANS — If the Federal Aviation Administration’s downgrading of New Orleans International Airport’s air traffic rating had been a court ruling, NOIA aviation director David Blackshear would be appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court.

However, since the FAA decision was a management one, Blackshear is prepared to go to the White House if necessary to restore the airport’s rating from a current Level 3 to its previous Level 4.

At stake is New Orleans International’s ability to recruit experienced radar-proven air traffic controllers from Level 3 airports in cities like Baton Rouge and Lafayette.

However, as things stand now, the airport must cope with attracting controllers from Level 2 airports where radar is not even a part of the air transportation system. The FAA forbids an airport with a particular air traffic rating to recruit controllers from airports with similar ratings.

“If they (the FAA) were to make the decision to reverse this process and they made the decision now, we’re not hurt,” Blackshear said in a recent interview. “If they make the decision a year from now, all of the loss of the controllers and our ability to get these people into the system is already behind us. It’s too late then.

“What we have to do is bring this fight to the highest level immediately. Frankly we assumed that the FAA would come to that decision on their own. We thought mistakenly that they would reverse their position long before now,” he said.

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The FAA downgraded New Orleans International’s air traffic rating in the fall of 1988 from Level 5 to Level 4 since the spring of 1979, because its "density factor" dropped from the minimum 60 flights per hour required for a Level 4 rating. The airport's current density factor stands at 52 flights an hour.

NOJA air traffic control manager Ken Friar explained that the density factor is determined by dividing the total number of flights during the busiest half of the year by the number of hours in that half. Friar said the airport's density factor is currently below the 60 required for a Level 4 rating because the airport has lost several controllers to other locations.

"We have to reduce our staffing levels to match the density factor," said Friar. "If we were to increase our staffing levels, we would have to increase our density factor, which would be a contradiction of the FAA's density factor formula." Friar said the airport's current density factor is 52, which is below the 60 required for a Level 4 rating.

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