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## A deeper dive into PIT's latest passenger numbers

Popular media would have you believe that all is hunky-dory at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT). After all, passenger counts generally were up and PIT's cargo operations were surging, based on November numbers, the latest available from the federal government.

"On the rise," a newspaper headline veritably shouted the update, missing only an exclamation point. "Pittsburgh International Airport traffic hits 84 percent of pre-COVID levels in November," it added.

But peeling back the onion layers of the Findlay Township facility's longer term passenger statistics tells a somewhat different and cautionary tale, concludes an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

It's one that yet again calls into question the need for a \$1.4 billion airport modernization project, says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank.

The Allegheny County Airport Authority "is building a new facility at great expense with little reasonable expectation of traffic ever returning to the levels seen in the late 1990s," the Ph.D. economist says (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 2*).

Indeed, the number of passengers boarding and deplaning PIT in November 2021 picked up markedly from November 2020. But it remained 16.1 percent below the November 2019 level. International travel remained 57 percent behind the two-year earlier reading while domestic passengers were off by 15.3 percent.

At the same time, in what Haulk calls "a very positive development," cargo at PIT has surged by 43 percent during the 24 months from November 2019 to last November. That said, November 2021 airport operations at PIT remained 7.3 percent lower than two years ago.

The rise of the Omicron COVID variant most assuredly has affected subsequent passenger numbers at PIT and nationally.

But in a most telling statistic, Pittsburgh International's passenger counts have not kept pace with national numbers and those airports in regions with better economic growth stories, such as in Nashville.

To wit, Nashville's passenger count in November 2021 was one percent higher than in November 2019. And growth over the pre-pandemic period was remarkable.

"The passenger count from November 2015 to November 2019 climbed 56.2 percent compared to PIT's 16 percent," Haulk notes. "Thus, despite the pandemic, the Nashville air travel momentum has relatively quickly returned passenger volume to pre-pandemic levels.

"This is consistent with overall growth in the area's economy," he says.

Unlike in Pittsburgh where growth has been anemic and at Pittsburgh International where publicly subsidized efforts to grow passenger counts have not been very successful.

"OneJet was an embarrassing disaster," Haulk recounts. "Subsidies to WOW and British Airways just made it cheaper for regional passengers to fly to Europe."

WOW and OneJet now are gone; British Airways halted service at the outbreak of the pandemic (but, still subsidized, says it will resume PIT flights in June).

"There have been no airport studies to show how many Europeans flew on these carriers to the Pittsburgh region," Haulk stresses. "Without substantial numbers of incoming European visitors to the region, all the promised benefits of the subsidies disappear.

"And worse, subsidizing local travelers to fly on British Airways through the money given to the airline means that more local people will fly to Europe and spend money helping European economies," Haulk adds.

Lest it be forgotten, air travel per passenger has been very costly over the last 20 months. Billions of federal dollars have kept airports open and planes in the air with practically no airport layoffs when traffic was greatly depressed, producing enormous increased operations costs not borne by ticket prices.

Which brings us back to PIT's questionable Terminal Modernization Program.

"The irony is that hundreds of millions of dollars in gaming tax revenue will be used to [help] build the new facility that could be used for other needed facilities or for education or to be used to reduce other taxes," Haulk says.

"Sadly, reality, recognition of past mistakes and the concept of opportunity cost, never entered into the decision to reconfigure the airport's landside terminal."

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