



### **PIT passenger counts and ongoing problematic issues**

#### *Overview*

The number of passengers boarding and deplaning at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) in November 2021 picked up markedly from November 2020 but 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 a very positive development, cargo at PIT has surged by 43 percent during the 24 months from November 2019 to last November. However, November 2021 airport operations at PIT were still 7.3 percent lower than two years ago.

#### *National stats*

The latest official Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) national data show passenger enplanements down 19.4 percent in September 2021 from September 2019. PIT's passenger total was 23.8 percent lower for September 2021 than in September 2019, lagging the U.S. recovery toward returning to pre-pandemic levels.

However, as measured by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint count, nationally passengers were down 23.7 percent last September compared to 24 months earlier. Note that the FAA enplanement count for September 2019 was 11 million greater than the TSA checkpoint count and 12 million higher than the checkpoint level in September 2021, possibly owing to the fact that enplanements include connecting passengers while TSA checkpoints only count those arriving at the entrance to the gate area of the airport.

In short, the TSA measure, while useful as an indication of the gains or lack of gains from two years earlier, is not perfect. Nonetheless, looking at the 24-month change in passengers from November 2019 to November 2021 at PIT, the two measures line up fairly close, likely due to the fact that PIT does not have a significant number of connecting passengers. The TSA count was lower by 15.9 percent compared to a shortfall of 16.1 percent at PIT. It remains to be seen if the FAA national enplanement data will show a bigger gain than PIT over the 24-month November-to-November period as it did for September.

It is noteworthy that the apparent national passenger count progress that was seen from September through November has not continued. Weak numbers around Christmas caused the TSA count for December to lose a bit of ground in terms of closing the gap with the December 2019 figure, slipping slightly to a shortfall of 16.2 percent. Thus far in early 2022, there has been a significant impact on air travel from the Omicron variant. During the first 10 days of January,

the TSA count was trailing the January 2019 level by 20 percent. It is almost certain that the effect on flight cancellations was being felt at PIT as well.

### *Other airports*

It is well known that airports and economies in different parts of the country have had very different responses to the Covid pandemic. This Brief will examine three airports, Nashville, Tampa and Philadelphia for the extent of recovery from the November 2019 traffic volume through November 2021. Data for all three are the latest available. December figures will not be available for a few more weeks.

**Nashville's** passenger count in November 2021 was one percent higher than in November 2019. Current figures are not broken down by domestic and international travelers. The growth at Nashville 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. 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.

The **Tampa** airport saw November 2021 passengers still 2 percent below the November 2019 level. A domestic increase of 1.5 percent was offset by a large 69 percent decline in international travel. Over the November 2015 to 2019 period, Tampa's passenger count was fairly anemic at only 14 percent. But it has shown considerable persistence and strength, especially domestic travel, following the worst of the pandemic's impact to stand just 2 percent below the November 2019 reading.

At the **Philadelphia** airport it has been a very tough two years since November 2019 with total passengers 29.1 percent lower in November 2021. Domestic was 26.8 percent lower and international was off by 52.9 percent. Moreover, the Philadelphia airport saw very sluggish gains over the period 2015 to 2019 with total passengers a scant 3.5 percent higher. Obviously, the Philadelphia airport gains have been far less robust than the national for some time. Indeed, it fell in airport rankings from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> busiest between 2010 and 2019.

### *PIT comparisons*

While PIT maintained its ranking of 46<sup>th</sup> from 2010 to 2019, bear in mind that it was 24<sup>th</sup> busiest in 2000. Moreover, the peak level of passenger traffic at PIT occurred in 1997. In short, the passenger trajectory has not been good. Meanwhile, Cincinnati and Cleveland have also seen major collapses in ranking from 2000 to 2019 with Cincinnati falling from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 49<sup>th</sup> and Cleveland dropping from 34<sup>th</sup> busiest to 45<sup>th</sup>.

At the same time, the Nashville airport rose from 38<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> busiest over the 2010 to 2019 period after climbing from 42<sup>nd</sup> in 2000 to 38<sup>th</sup> in 2010. Tampa International also moved up in rank from 29<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> over the 2010 to 2019 after standing at 28<sup>th</sup> in 2000.

In sum, major airports in Pennsylvania and Ohio have fallen behind since 2000 in terms of keeping up with national gains or the performance in Nashville or Tampa.

### *Failure of subsidies*

Struggles at PIT to grow passenger counts have not been very successful. Attempts to generate increased passenger levels have focused on subsidizing carriers such as OneJet, WOW and

British Airways, for example. There have been no discernible lasting positive effects from any of these efforts.

OneJet was an embarrassing disaster. Subsidies to WOW and British Airways just made it cheaper for regional passengers to fly to Europe. WOW is now gone. British Airways halted service at the outbreak of the pandemic. There have been no airport studies to show how many Europeans flew on these carriers to the Pittsburgh region. 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. Then, too, the fares paid go directly to British Airways accounts. But using tax dollars for these flights is glamorous and gets headlines.

British Airways says it plans to resume taxpayer subsidized flights to PIT in early June.

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 per passenger not borne by ticket prices.

Now, the Pittsburgh airport 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 irony is that hundreds of millions of dollars in gaming tax revenue will be used to build the new facility that could be used for other needed facilities or for education or to be used to reduce other taxes.

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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