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Cheerleading aside, PIT's struggles deepen

Much rah-rah-sis-boom-bahing has been coming out of the Allegheny County Airport Authority about how robust passenger and cargo traffic has been at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) as we continue to put the coronavirus pandemic behind us.

But a new analysis of the latest-available numbers suggests such cheerleading is misleading, according to a scholar at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

"Like the region's employment recovery through October, activity at PIT has yet to return to the pre-pandemic levels of 2019 or 2018, for that matter," says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 22, No. 43*).

And recent developments at the Findlay Township airport are not encouraging.

"Total passenger counts [for October 2022] at PIT remained 13.8 percent behind the October 2019 posting. This is a poorer performance than in September when the total passenger count was 11.8 percent under the 2019 figure," notes Haulk.

But it gets worse.

"The international passenger count at PIT in October was still 43 percent behind the October 2019 reading and 42 percent below the October 2018 level.

"This despite the return of the British Airways (BA) subsidized travel in June," the think tank scholar reminds.

Additionally, airport operations remained 20 percent behind the 2019 October reading and nearly 22 percent below the October 2018 level.

And cargo handled at the airport, which had picked up strongly in 2020 and 2021, nosedived by 28.6 percent in October below the year-earlier reading.

"Even more alarming was the decline in the cargo level—6 percent lower than the October 2019 figure. Cargo handling had been the one bright spot in airport activity data.

The Airport Authority, by the way, recently broke ground on a new \$24.5 million/76-thousand-square-foot cargo facility.

Despite the lagging international travel numbers, British Airways recently exercised its previously undisclosed option for another \$500,000 in public subsidies (on top of the original subsidy of \$3 million over two years.) That, after local officials traveled to London to urge BA to add flights.

Airport Authority CEO Christina Cassotis defended the junket by noting that “Pittsburgh is a global brand, and we need to tell that story whenever and wherever we get the chance. That’s vital to building partnerships and increasing international air service. Thanks to our partners at British Airways for taking the time to understand and believe in this market.”

But if all that is true, if Pittsburgh is a standout market in the world, “why is it necessary to go to great lengths to sell it?” asks Haulk, a Ph.D. economist. “How is it that after the time it has been operating at PIT, BA did not see the need to add flights? Were they unaware of the ‘global brand’ that justified more flights?”

Not only did the Allegheny Institute thoroughly debunk the Airport Authority’s inflated economic impact claims of the BA flights (in *Policy Brief, Vol. 19, No 14*), it continues to raises questions about the ratio of travelers and their dollars being exported to the United Kingdom and other European points versus the number of people and dollars the flights import into the Greater Pittsburgh economy.

PIT never has published the percentages of U.S. and European passengers using the British Airways flights.

But the Pittsburgh regional economy has far bigger problems than a lack of flights to Europe. “Indeed,” Haulk says, “there are many options to get to London on one-stop flights for people who really need or want to go.”

And as noted many times, regional employment is not expanding, population growth is nearly nonexistent and the core city is essentially living on its past glories.

The problem is fundamental: Pittsburgh is not a business-friendly region,” Haulk reiterates decades of the same admonition. “Labor issues, taxes and the regulatory environment are major roadblocks to achieving the kind of growth many areas of the country are enjoying.

“All the special development programs and subsidizing this or that flavor-of-the-month sector, including air travel to England, are very poor substitutes for an economic climate that is business friendly,” Haulk concludes.

Colin McNickle is communications and marketing director at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy (cmcnickle@alleghenyinstitute.org).

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Allegheny Institute for Public Policy
305 Mt. Lebanon Blvd.* Suite 208* Pittsburgh PA 15234
Phone (412) 440-0079
E-mail: aipp@alleghenyinstitute.org
Website: www.alleghenyinstitute.org
Twitter: [AlleghenyInsti1](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInsti1)