



April 19, 2023

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

705 words

PIT's misleading stats, rose-colored glasses

By Colin McNickle

The Allegheny County Airport Authority used a misleading comparison to make it appear that passenger and operations numbers at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT) have improved more than they have, concludes a new analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

As it happens, the PIT decline in passengers from February 2020 to February 2023 was 12 percent, much larger than the 6.3 percent 2019 to 2023 figure, says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank.

PIT suffered serious passenger count and aircraft operations setbacks during the COVID pandemic period that began in March 2020. Recovery has been underway for a couple of years. But travel to and from the airport remains well below the pre-pandemic levels.

The Airport Authority announced March 17 that the February passenger count had improved to reach 93.7 percent of February 2019 levels. Or put another way, the February 2023 passenger count (domestic and international) was 6.3 percent below the same month in 2019.

The reported decline would mark an impressive gain compared to the shortfalls posted last fall when the September through November average decline was well over 12 percent. Bear in mind, the large 17 percent decline in December was caused by massive flight cancellations nationwide during the month.

But while the 6.3 percent shortfall compared to February 2019 looks favorable, there are two things to bear in mind:

“First, passenger counts were still growing through February 2020,” reminds Haulk. “The pandemic did not take hold in a meaningful way until March 2020. Notably, the count in February 2020 was 41,433 higher than in February 2019, a very healthy gain of 6.5 percent over 12 months.

“Second, there was a significant 3 percent decline in passengers between January and February 2019, mainly because of a dip in domestic passengers, he says (in *Policy Brief Vol. 23, No.15*).

“In short, comparing the February 2023 to the February 2019 count is not the best measure of the air travel recovery at PIT,” the Ph.D. economist says, noting that a more accurate measure is to look at the 2023 figures compared to the 2020 levels.

Unfortunately, for March 2023 and following months this year, the pre-pandemic months of 2019 will be the pre-pandemic baseline. And that means the comparisons will be with passenger counts of four years ago.

Another cause for concern is that aircraft operations in February remained well below the same month in 2019 (15 percent) and 15 percent behind the February 2020 reading.

“Indeed, February operations remain well below the same month five years earlier in 2018, trailing by 14.6 percent. 2018 had the highest annual total of operations since 2016, the first year that annual totals were posted on their website.

“After February 2020, operations nosedived for many months, dipping to a yearly total of only 91,803, a far cry from the two years prior that averaged almost 150,000,” Haulk says.

Operations began to rebound in 2021, rising to 108,464 and rose further to 121,650 in 2022.

“However, unless the pace quickens sharply from the current levels over the rest of the year, 2023 total operations will remain 10 to 15 percent below pre-pandemic levels,” the think tank scholar adds.

The bottom line remains that the level of passenger traffic at PIT depends to a significant extent on the strength of the economy, population, jobs and income in the region. But those metrics continue to sag. And all that goes back to the facts on the ground that too many public officials whistle past:

“Data from metro areas in several Right-to-Work states with low percentages of public-sector unionization have been studied repeatedly and point to a strong correlation of passenger traffic gains at metro area airports and the vibrancy of the area’s economy, job increases and population growth,” Haulk reminds.

“Hoping to see large gains in passenger traffic in a region with a stagnant or shrinking economy and moribund job gains is just that—hope,” he says.

“It is hope that is highly unlikely to be realized.”

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