



August 9, 2023

Allegheny Institute Op-Ed

630 words

The trouble behind PIT's passenger numbers

By Colin McNickle

The Allegheny County Airport Authority is constructing a new \$1.4 billion check-in, ticketing and security terminal at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT). It is, ostensibly, part of a bid to boost long-flagging passenger numbers at the Findlay Township facility.

And while the price tag for the new terminal is almost certain to rise—as they are wont to do with such projects – a researcher at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy says that, past being prologue, there's far less certainty that passenger counts can be increased without a major improvement in two key economic metrics.

“Efforts to increase the number of passengers using PIT absent a significant boost in jobs and income in the region will continue to be frustrated,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank.

Additionally, “using taxpayer dollars to subsidize travel to and from PIT does not benefit the region,” the Ph.D. economist stresses (in *Policy Brief Vol. 23, No. 28*).

“It just helps pay for people to fly out of the area and spend money out of the region while boosting carrier revenue,” Haulk says. “And it looks bad for the region to be subsidizing air travel.”

The latest iteration of that -- in a long line of public airline subsidies—comes with speculation of a multimillion-dollar subsidy to lure Irish national carrier Aer Lingus to fly between Pittsburgh and Dublin.

The simple fact of the matter is that PIT has experienced a very weak 23-year run since the loss of USAirways as its major hub in the early 2000s.

Even after the hub-loss impact, enplanements at PIT—that is, revenue passenger boardings that receive scheduled or nonscheduled passenger service—continued to slide through 2010, remained below 4 million a year until a recovery, albeit modest, boosted passenger enplanements

to 4.72 million in 2019, the highest count since 2007. And, of course, the pandemic wiped out those meager gains and passengers remain below the 2019 reading.

Moreover, the huge decline in passengers has resulted in PIT's national airport ranking dropping from 23rd at the start of the century to 49th in 2022.

“The airport’s woes have run parallel to the very anemic private-sector job performance in the Pittsburgh region, which saw only a 3 percent rise in the 23 years through June and the employee count remains below the pre-pandemic posting,” Haulk says.

“In short, PIT’s history since the beginning of the 21st century has been woeful. And while progress toward the pre-pandemic reading is continuing as of May 2023, total passengers were still 69,396 or 7.8 percent below May 2019.”

Even the just-released June passenger data is not necessarily encouraging, despite how Airport Authority officials might attempt to characterize it.

“Passenger [numbers] remained 5.3 percent below the June 2019 reading with international passengers down 30 percent from 2019 and 53 percent from the 2018 level,” Haulk says.

We guess “doing well,” how officials have characterized the taxpayer-subsidized British Airways flights to London, is a relative term.

Additionally, cumulative year-to-date passengers remain 7.1 percent below June 2019.

Without significant growth in jobs and income in the Pittsburgh metro area—and with that, population—hopes that PIT will return to its halcyon days of robust passenger numbers likely will remain a chimera, rendering the new terminal project to a very expensive failure.

Some have posited that the new airport terminal is necessary to boost, if not save, Pittsburgh’s economy. But the real narrative should be asking if the Pittsburgh economy will be able to support, if not save, the newly reconfigured Pittsburgh International.

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

Op-Eds may be reprinted as long as proper attribution is given.

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: [AlleghenyInstil](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInstil)