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The real story behind PIT's 'rebounding' passenger numbers

By Colin McNickle

Despite continued rosy pronouncements about rebounding post-pandemic passenger counts at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT), the Findlay Township facility continues to compare poorly to similar-sized airports nationwide, says a researcher at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“Compared to October 2019, PIT’s October 2023 total passenger count of 835,295 was down 4.3 percent,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank. “Domestic travel was off by 4.1 percent over the period and international passengers, at 16,299, were 12.7 percent lower than four-years earlier.”

Airport operations, at 11,229, fell 14.3 percent short of the 2019 reading.

In November, the latest month available, activity showed a narrowing shortfall from the November 2019 readings in total (-1.3 percent) and domestic (-1.0 percent).

“However, the international count fell 17.2 percent below the 2019 number,” the Ph.D. economist notes (in *Policy Brief Vol. 24, No.4*). “Operations were off by 12.6 percent from November 2019 to November 2023.”

Operations are a fairly strong indicator of all activity including passengers, mail and cargo being handled at the airport.

And PIT’s passenger performance is no less unimpressive when compared with that at four comparably sized airports in San Antonio, Cleveland, Columbus and Palm Beach.

Haulk found that total passengers at the San Antonio airport stood at 854,152 in November 2019 and climbed 10.5 percent to 943,426 in November 2023.

Cleveland’s airport saw its passenger count increase from 776,449 in November 2019 to 834,503 in November 2023 or 7.5 percent.

In Columbus, the passenger count rose 1.2 percent from November 2019 (702,070) to November 2023 (710,325).

Finally, at Palm Beach airport, Haulk says passengers jumped from 583,868 in November 2019 to 684,932 in November 2023, a huge 17.5 percent increase.

“All four comparison airports had increases in passengers from November 2019 to November 2023, ranging from just 1.2 percent in Columbus to 17.5 percent at Palm Beach,” Haulk notes. “The unweighted average gain for the airports was 9.2 percent.

“Interestingly,” he adds, “San Antonio and Cleveland had very large jumps in international travel while Palm Beach and PIT had declines.”

And do note, Haulk stresses, the largest percentage passenger gains at Palm Beach and San Antonio were accompanied by sizable employment increases in their respective metro areas. Columbus had small gains in both private employment and passengers while Cleveland posted an outlier result of healthy passenger growth with area employment down from 2019.

The key takeaway:

“PIT had poor results in all measures,” Haulk says. “Passengers, domestic and international were still trailing 2019 levels and metro area private jobs had failed to recover to pre-pandemic levels.”

The bottom line is that Pittsburgh International’s passenger count and the Pittsburgh metro area’s jobs after four years remain below the pre-COVID readings, the only airport of the five reviewed to post such a troubling metric.

“The region’s employment growth has been very weak compared to the nation and other regions for many years,” Haulk reminds. “Growth-stifling policies that have been in place for decades are not being replaced by more business-friendly government attitudes.

“In several [Pittsburgh-area] counties, one-party rule, heavy pro-union bias, a backwards approach to property assessments updates and declines in education quality in many school districts do not bode well for solid economic and employment growth,” Haulk recounts in his steadfast bill of dismaying particulars.

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