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PIT's rising passenger count still trails national gains

By Colin McNickle

While passenger levels at Pittsburgh International Airport recovered to May 2019 numbers this past May, they continued to lag the national upturn, says a researcher at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“There is no escaping the fact that the strength of local economies is an important driver of air travel demand,” says Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Pittsburgh think tank (in *Policy Brief Vol. 24, No. 25*).

The Ph.D. economist reminds that in March 2020, COVID-19 arrived in the United States in full force. And by April that year, airline travel had virtually disappeared.

PIT managed only 92,500 total passengers in May 2020. Recovery was slow and by 2023, the May passenger count remained 73,000 or 8.3 percent below the 2019 reading.

“However, May 2024 has seen the passenger count slightly surpass the May 2019 level, standing at 892,467, a pickup of 72,000 or 1.9 percent compared to the 2019 level,” Haulk says.

But, he also notes, “May 2024 international passengers were down 5.5 percent from 2019’s total and 11.7 percent from the 2016 reading, notwithstanding all the subsidies being handed out to British Airways.”

Nationally, the latest data for air travel are provided by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for persons passing through security check points.

While a good measure of originating passengers, Haulk stresses it does not capture passengers making connections.

“Thus, it is not a perfect measure to compare with all airports, including those with large numbers of connecting flights and passengers,” the researcher says. But it is a fairly good comparative gauge for airports with relatively few connecting passengers such as PIT.

And to the extent the checkpoint numbers at specific airports track reasonably closely to all passengers boarding and deplaning, it can be used as a national comparison indicator.

“In any case, the TSA had a daily average of 2.59 million passengers pass through security in May 2024 compared to an average of 2.40 million in May 2019—an increase of 7.8 percent,” Haulk says. “Obviously, this was much stronger than the 1.9 percent rise in passengers recorded for the same period at PIT.”

But Haulk’s research shows that “it is readily discernible that markets with significant job growth are more likely to have moderate to strong passenger-count gains.”

To wit, Austin and Nashville, with strong job growth, had enormous passenger increases.

“Nashville could have enjoyed large gains as a result of additional hubbing activity and more connecting passengers,” Haulk notes. “Raleigh-Durham job gains were not proportionally reflected in air passenger growth, although the area did match the national gain in air passengers.”

That said, changes in carrier offerings could have played a part as well.

But, again, local economic conditions remain an important metric in air travel demand, the think tank scholar says.

Back to PIT.

“(G)iven the softness in the region’s job gains and the apparent lack of increasing response to the subsidized British Airways flights, any passenger gains beyond the bounce back from COVID are likely to be muted,” Haulk concludes.

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