The sizzle & steak of PIT’s June passenger numbers

By Colin McNickle

It was early 20th-century advertising pioneer Elmer Wheeler who coined the iconic “Don’t sell the steak, sell the sizzle” sales pitch.

That is, as one historical reference has it, “the sound and aroma of a sizzling steak is a better focus for an ad than the raw, inert steak itself, no matter how well you might describe it.”

It’s a tactic the Allegheny County Airport Authority appears to have employed to tout the June surge in passenger numbers at Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT).

Indeed, authority numbers show a sizeable increase for both domestic and international passengers that month. In fact, it was the highest June level since 2007, which was close to the latest June reading.

That’s the sizzle the Airport Authority has pushed out to the public. But let’s not forget the perspective that the steak also offers.

“For the U.S., annual passenger totals rose 26 percent from 2007 through 2019 and moved less than one percent higher from 2019 to 2023,” reminds Jake Haulk, president-emeritus of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy. “During the same periods, PIT saw a 3.3 percent drop in 2019 compared to 2007 and a further decline of 5.4 percent between 2019 and 2023.”

And when compared with several peer airports, PIT’s June sizzle is forced to confront reality.

To wit, Haulk, cites government data to show that in 2007, PIT ranked 43rd nationally with 4,875,883 in passenger enplanements and in 2019 had 4,715,947 to rank 46th. Note that PIT’s ranking fell to 49th in 2022. The 2023 official rankings are not yet posted.

Chosen for comparison are William Hobby in Houston (rank 44th), Columbus (50th), San Antonio (49th) and Jacksonville (58th), based on 2007 data.


“Columbus saw a 9 percent increase in passengers through 2019 but its rank was unchanged at 50th. Finally, Jacksonville posted a 10.8 percent passenger gain, lifting its rank from 58th to 52nd. In each of the
four cases the airport either gained or stayed even in their ranking and had passenger growth,” Haulk says.

Moreover, the Ph.D. economist says it must be noted that PIT’s big jump in June 2024 international passengers was driven in part by the advent of subsidized Icelandic Air flights that contributed to the rise in international travel to its highest count since June 2019.

More sizzle. But, back to the raw, inert steak: “[June 2024] international passengers were still 35 percent below the June 2018 level,” Haulk reminds.

And lest one forget, “domestic passenger numbers in June were no doubt boosted significantly by the extremely low introductory fares on additional flights offered by Frontier Airlines following their obtaining a subsidy of $600,000,” Haulk says.

In addition to introducing twice per day trips to Philadelphia, Frontier added new destinations to Atlanta, Dallas and Raleigh-Durham. The carrier already had flights to Denver and Orlando.

“With exceptionally low introductory fares to all the cities, it seems fairly certain that passengers on each flight to and from these cities were far above the traveler count prior to the new fares,” the think tank scholar notes.

Haulk concedes that the nearly 14 percent increase in June passengers at PIT from 12 months earlier is “impressive.” But he says such a jump must be viewed with some skepticism and caution.

“Clearly, much of the outsized monthly growth was driven by the low introductory fares at Frontier and Icelandic Air,” he says, also reminding that’s not to say that some of the growth was part of the ongoing recovery from the COVID downturn in 2020-21.

“Looking ahead, and absent the arrival of sizable hubbing activity, the fundamentals of the regional economy, population and employment will be the principal drivers of passenger growth at PIT,” Haulk concludes.

Or its stagnation.

“Large gains in passengers resulting from exceptionally low fares cannot be sustained. The experience of low-cost carriers has been littered with bankruptcies.”

Remember all this as Airport Authority types continue to highlight the sizzle while asking the public not to consider the steak.

*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  
X: AlleghenyInst1