

PIT's passenger count dependent on the region's economy

Introduction: In the late 1990s, the Pittsburgh International Airport (PIT), with a newly constructed terminal from earlier in the decade, posted much higher passenger counts than it has seen in recent years. Of course, USAirways had a hub during that period. From 1996 to 1998, PIT averaged 20.6 million passengers (enplanements and deplanements) per year. In 2000 and 2001, annual passengers averaged just over 19 million. In 2002 passenger counts began to slip, falling to 7.9 million in 2009 as USAirways entered bankruptcy.

Longer-term performance

Passenger counts remained in the 7.9 to 8.3 million yearly range from 2009 until 2017 when it reached almost 8.5 million. Since 2017, passenger totals rose through 2024—except for the COVID-affected years of 2020 through 2022. By 2024 the passenger total reached 9.95 million—with significant assistance from a subsidy to Frontier Airlines. In 2025, passengers fell slightly to 9.85 million and in August 2026 fell by 4 percent (862,500) from August 2025. Through the first eight months of 2026, the passenger count was down 1.5 percent for the comparable period in 2025.

PIT is no longer a hub airport, with hub operations ending in the early 2000s. That means PIT's regional passenger base now accounts for a very large fraction, if not the majority, of all fliers.

Thus, the local population, employment and economic activity largely determine the growth or lack of growth in the level of passenger counts at PIT. In that regard, note that the population of the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) fell over 35 years from 1990 to 2025, dropping from 2.564 million to 2.424 million. Meanwhile, Allegheny County's population, which comprises a large fraction of the area total, fell from 1.336 million to 1.225 million in 2025. All population data are from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis website.

Employment (which is a principal driver of income) is no doubt a substantial source of demand for air travel. In the Pittsburgh MSA [non-farm employment](#) stood at 1.07 million

in 1990. By 2000, the jobs count rose to 1.18 million, an increase of 110,600 or 10.3 percent in 10 years. By 2019 (pre-COVID), the jobs total in the region reached 1.22 million, 39,100 (3.3 percent) above 2000's reading. By comparison from 2000 to 2019, U.S. non-farm [employment](#) climbed from 132.0 million to 150.9 million or 14.3 percent. Obviously, some areas of the country grew faster than the national average; some much faster. Furthermore, the U.S. non-farm job total had exceeded the pre-COVID level in 2025 by reaching 158.5 million while the Pittsburgh MSA had yet to reach the 2019 reading, rising only to 1.20 million.

In Allegheny County, no doubt the largest single source of passengers at PIT, employment has seen weak growth as well—not surprising with the decline in population. From 1990 to 2019, employment in the county rose from 612.8 thousand to 641.9 thousand, a gain of 4.7 percent. Unfortunately, jobs fell in the county through 2025, dipping to 618.4 thousand, a loss of 23,514 or 3.6 percent. On net, the 35-year change in the number of jobs in the county amounts to less than one percent.

In short, the 35-year period from 1990 to 2025—which covers the period of construction of the now old airport in the early 90s and the new airport which opened in 2025—has been a very weak period in terms of population gains and employment growth in the Pittsburgh MSA and Allegheny County in particular. This certainly is not an environment that lends itself to significant growth in demand for air travel. After the USAirways hub was discontinued in the early 2000s, flight demand has edged up far slower than national trends.

By way of comparison, nationally the air traveler count rose from 455 million in 1990 to 891 million in 2025, up 424 million—more than doubling the 1990 count (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, www.bts.gov). Indeed, in both years the number of air passengers exceeded the U.S. population by a large ratio. This massive growth in passengers is far above the job increase, suggesting there is a very high propensity to fly more as employment and incomes rise.

Conclusions

PIT officials have tried for many years to grapple with poor economic fundamentals. Since the loss of the USAirways hub operations in the early 2000s, the airport has had to find ways to gin-up passenger demand in the face of a very slow-growing regional economy. Subsidies to airlines, especially low-cost carriers, to lower fares has been a mainstay of the plan. But carriers have come and gone, and those subsidies have made little, if any, difference in sustained passenger total increases.

Now in the face of the weak regional economy measured by employment gains and little population growth, the airport has built a new \$1.7 billion terminal. As the Institute has noted in an earlier [Brief](#), servicing the debt incurred to pay for the construction will require upwards of \$110 million dollars per year. Even assuming the airport's claim that \$23 million dollars will be saved by closing the old terminal, it still needs \$87 million dollars from somewhere to finance the debt.

Where does that come from, assuming travel remains about the same or slips further? There is little reason to expect significantly higher travel absent major airline subsidies through lower gate fees and direct payments, which could prevent major increases in ticket prices. But with a looming debt burden, the airport will be hard pressed to find the funds to do all that.

All of which means that the bulk of the \$87 million will fall largely on the 4.5 million enplaning passengers (given recent figures and assuming no major increases or decreases from recent levels). Note this does not include any other spending increases that the airport might need to make, such as higher energy or labor costs. Deplaning passengers might make token purchases if they are connecting to another flight. It is unlikely they will incur a significant portion of the higher costs.

Eighty-seven million dollars divided by 4.5 million enplaning passenger amounts to \$19.33 dollars per passenger per year. How that gets collected is the question since that is the average. Is it through parking rate hikes? If so, parking fliers will get hit. Is it through higher ticket prices because of higher gate fees and other fees paid by airlines imposed by the airport? Will it be through the higher cost of purchases at airport shops and restaurants as their rents are hiked? No doubt frequent fliers will resent the added costs the most.

Or will the airport go to the federal or state government seeking grants for added funding to prevent having to increase the burden on passengers?

Then there is the cost of demolishing or repurposing the old terminal into something useful. No figures on what that might cost have been released.

A regional or national economic slowdown for an extended period which reduces air travel at PIT will be a disaster and will lead to entreaties for help from the state. Will the governor or the Legislature look kindly at any further bailouts?

Jake Haulk, Ph.D., President-emeritus

Policy Briefs 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
X (Twitter): [AlleghenyInstl](https://twitter.com/AlleghenyInstl)