

The Columbus Dispatch

September 18, 2018

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Big Ideas Are Needed to Expand Air Travel

By Matt A. Mayer

Recently The Dispatch printed an article about a proposal to have state tax funds subsidize getting additional nonstop flights at John Glenn Columbus International Airport. The newspaper followed up with an editorial in support of the proposal. In many ways, Columbus and the rest of Ohio are stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to our airports.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 29th-ranked Cincinnati Metropolitan Statistical Area is Ohio's largest with 2.2 million people. The Columbus MSA, ranked 32nd, is next with 2.1 million followed by the Cleveland MSA at 2.06 million people. According to the latest passenger boarding data, Cleveland's airport, ranked 43rd, had roughly 4.6 million boardings, followed by Cincinnati's 49th-ranked airport with 3.9 million boardings and Columbus's 50th-ranked airport with 3.8 million boardings. As the data show, the population of our cities is much larger than the airports in those cities.

Why?

As I asked over six years ago in "Taxpayers Don't Stand a Chance," "Why didn't Ohio's leaders 'see' the need for better air travel support and make the investments in infrastructure to facilitate growth?" Ohio's current dilemma started more than 30 years ago under Govs. Dick Celeste and George Voinovich; the various mayors of Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus; and the county commissioners in Hamilton, Cuyahoga and Franklin counties. All of those political leaders failed to predict how the airport hub system and airline consolidation would leave nonhub cities like Columbus in a permanent laggard state.

Back in 2012, before United Airlines pulled out of Cleveland and Delta Air Lines pulled out of Cincinnati, the total number of cities that Ohioans could reach via a daily direct flight from those six airports was just 68. There are 343 metropolitan areas in America with populations in excess of 100,000 people. Those 343 cities contain businesses and customers to Ohio businesses.

If doing business in those cities requires flying somewhere else to catch a second flight there, it creates inefficiencies, especially with delays and cancellations. That is why NCR left Dayton for top-ranked Atlanta and Chiquita Brands left Cincinnati for 10th-ranked Charlotte. Time spent flying or in connection airports is time and money wasted.

Looking ahead, if Columbus doesn't land Amazon's second headquarters, a top reason will be our weak airport. We just aren't a conducive or competitive place for business travel.

Because of Ohio's lack of a hub, the state subsidy idea, if enacted, will require a permanent subsidy to lure and keep daily direct flights. Ohioans and their businesses need bigger thinking.

For example, as I wrote in my book, "with Cincinnati's population growing north and east of the city, getting to the airport is taking longer and longer because it is located in Kentucky. Similarly, with the population in Dayton growing south of the city, getting to the airport located to the north of the city is a haul. Why not build a new airport using the existing structure in Wilmington?"

A Wilmington-based airport wouldn't extend the drive for most southwest Ohioans and, by combining the passenger traffic and shutting down the Cincinnati and Dayton airports, the new airport would be more attractive to airlines. A similar approach might be viable for the Cleveland-Akron-Canton MSA.

As for Columbus, short of moving the passenger traffic from its landlocked location to Rickenbacker where an increasing amount of cargo traffic is occurring, as Denver did when it moved from Stapleton International Airport to Denver International Airport, there isn't much we can now do. Perhaps by moving to Rickenbacker where lots of land is still available, Columbus could attract growth as Denver did following its move 26 miles outside the city. With population growth similar to what is occurring in Colorado (30 percent since 2000) and Texas (36 percent), it might be possible to make Ohio (2.7 percent) attractive enough that we wouldn't have to subsidize airlines in order to get somewhere without first having to go somewhere else.

As a frequent flyer, I always chuckle when landing in Columbus as the flight attendant makes the blanket comment for those passengers making a connection. No one flying into Columbus ever has a connection. It is the final destination. Only with big ideas will that reality change.

Matt A. Mayer is President of Opportunity Ohio.