



The Business Perspective: Lax Modernization Grounded By Political Will

Gary L. Toebben, President & CEO, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce

Weather delays at major airports throughout the nation have made national news this winter. Unfortunately, we have a larger problem at the Los Angeles International Airport regardless of sunny skies.

It has been nearly a quarter century since the last major modernization of LAX. In preparation for the 1984 Olympics, the Tom Bradley International Terminal, Terminal 1, Parking Structures 1, 3 and 4 and the second level roadway were all constructed.

Following the bold sprint for the Olympics, LAX has since been stuck in the starting blocks for more than two decades. As a result, local businesses and residents not only dread the physical age and lack of amenities at LAX but they are also faced with less flight selection. Why? Because travelers from around the world who once used LAX as their business and tourism gateway to the United States now choose to fly into other cities. These cities wisely invested in their airports while LAX remained stagnant, with efforts to modernize mired in protests by local residents and financial disagreements with tenants.

The numbers tell the story of LAX's decline. Passenger traffic at the airport fell 1 percent during 2006 and is down 9.3 percent since Sept. 11. Conversely, passenger travel at airports across the country is up 4 percent and worldwide airline travel is up 10 percent since Sept. 11. LAX served 6 million less passengers last year than it did in 2000, with the number of flights down from an average of 2,146 per day to 1,800 per day. A few have opted for our smaller regional airports, while the vast majority of travelers have chosen to bypass L.A. entirely. That equates to millions of dollars in lost tourism, business and jobs.

Not only is LAX old and outdated, the airport now faces a situation where it may not be able to serve the new class of global airplanes being manufactured by Boeing and Airbus.

To accommodate these airplanes, LAX needs taller gates, more space between gates, and more space between the runways and taxiways. LAX-owned land is available to make these improvements, but local residents have so far successfully blocked any substantive effort to modernize.

Let's be clear, modernizing LAX will not create more noise or pollution for neighbors. It will allow LAX to accommodate the new generation of environmentally friendly aircraft that generate far less noise and pollution than their predecessors. Updating gates and terminals will reduce the time planes idle on the runway and passengers spend waiting in their seats. This much needed progress is being held up.

When I traveled with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to Asia last fall, our entire delegation was impressed with the quality of the region's international airports. It became clear that the world was passing LAX by. The trip furthered our commitment to making sure that the L.A. region remain the business capital of the Pacific Rim and LAX the premier gateway to the United States.

Other U.S. cities developed their political will to move forward. San Francisco, Las Vegas, Chicago and New York are racing to modernize their airports and benefit from our regional inaction. If we allow small constituencies to deprive millions of Southern Californians the international gateway airport necessary to being a global financial center, we will have done a great disservice to our entire community, resulting in lost jobs, tourism and business.

LAX is not the only airport in our region. Developing a regional airport system that includes Ontario and Palmdale is an important component to modernization. But L.A.'s quality of life and future as an international destination is inexorably tied to LAX. We must align our local politics with the vision to be America's number one global city in the 21st century. We cannot afford any more false starts. It's time to sprint again.

And that's The Business Perspective.