

Chicago freight handler Superior Logistics setting up at Rickenbacker, lured by potential

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A new renter, employer and believer in the potential of Rickenbacker International Airport has opened a cargo facility at the Rickenbacker Global Logistics Park.



In a move aimed at getting space at the airport before it gets busier, international cargo handler Superior Logistics Ltd. is expanding outside of its Chicago-area base by leasing a 20,000-square-foot building adjoining Rickenbacker's runways.

Though small by standards of the sprawling airport, the arrival of Franklin Park, Ill.-based Superior is notable because few have set up shop there, despite steps to attract more air cargo business and assurance that additional freight will come as some of the airport's attributes begin to catch on. The last new tenant to Rickenbacker's air cargo buildings was a company that took 4,800 square feet in January 2010.

Superior, which breaks up and redistributes international shipments, has seen greater demand for shipments to Central Ohio and has heard increasing talk about Rickenbacker as an alternative to heavily used Chicago airports, said Superior partner Jeff Bruner. The company plans to hire 35 employees and could expand to a larger building at the airport in several months.

"We see the potential growth," Bruner said. "My freight forwarders, a lot of them have offices in Hong Kong and in mainland China, and I hear rumbling that more of them will be coming into the Columbus area."

International shipments

Superior's main function is to break up, organize and distribute huge air shipments that often are made up of cargo consolidated from several companies, Bruner said. Superior

plans to unload cargo, move it into its warehouse, divvy up what's on pallets and then put the freight aboard trucks headed to other distributors, he said.

Superior has missed opportunities to handle consolidated air freight in Central Ohio primarily because it lacked a warehouse where it could split up bulk shipments, Bruner said.

"We had airlines that came to me and said, 'You have a better rate on trucking and we think you do a better job, but you need a warehouse to deliver to,' " he said.

That's where Rickenbacker comes in. Superior plans to hire full- and part-time workers, including part-time airport employees who will handle cargo for Superior after their work shifts at the airport are complete, Bruner said.

"The minute they're done handling cargo at the aircraft, they punch out at the airport and punch in with Superior to get the rest of their shift," he said.

Superior has a deal with a freight manager to handle cargo coming in on Kalitta Air LLC's Boeing 747s, Bruner said. Ypsilanti Township, Mich.-based Kalitta in October doubled the weekly number of 747 cargo flights to four, he said.

"The freight coming in on those Kalitta flights warranted me opening up and keeps the lights on," he said. "And it allows me to go after other customers."

Lower landing fees, less aircraft taxiing time and quality cargo-handling service at Rickenbacker make it attractive, Bruner said.

Rickenbacker boost

There are many former military bases like Rickenbacker around the U.S., and many are vying to develop air cargo operations, said Mike Webber, owner of Webber Air Cargo Inc., a consulting firm in Kansas City, Mo.

"Having someone come in and do that is better than having a bunch of political hacks talk about someone coming in and building millions in developable space but never having it happen," said Webber, an outspoken critic of an ambitious, expensive and ultimately abandoned plan to develop an air cargo hub in St. Louis.

For Rickenbacker, Superior's arrival means rental revenue and another service provider for air cargo companies. Indeed, most freight airlines considering a new destination look for an airport with multiple cargo handlers, Bruner said. Superior will compete against publicly traded Forward Air Corp. at Rickenbacker.

"We're very delighted to have them in place," said David Whitaker, vice president of business development for the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, which runs Rickenbacker, Port Columbus International Airport and Bolton Field. "They bring existing relationships and they help us deliver our message to our target customers."

Rickenbacker might be attractive because users can avoid the long delays cargo planes face at Chicago, but it has few major air cargo companies, said Ned Wallace, president of Wallace Air Cargo Group Inc., a Newport Beach, Calif.-based company that handles business development and sales for Kalitta. And landing another cargo handler does little for an freight carrier's wishes to fly into Rickenbacker if cargo volume can't justify additional flights, he said. In fact, Kalitta expects to reduce its Columbus flights from four weekly to three at some point, he said.

"Cargo generally drives the arrival of service providers," Wallace said, "and business is slow everywhere."

But sometimes a service provider will arrive with expectations that added cargo will come later, such as with Superior.

"We are basically rolling the dice," Bruner said.