

The Columbus Dispatch

Editorial

Big step for Rickenbacker

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The public's investment in Rickenbacker Airport is paying off: Though Rickenbacker's benefits to the region have, for years, been indisputable — 20,000 jobs created and \$2.8 billion a year infused into the central Ohio economy — the airport itself had struggled with years of deficits.

But to everyone's surprise, the airport wrapped up 2015 with a \$1.67 million surplus on its books, despite an earlier forecast by the airport authority that had predicted continued red ink. This shift is even more impressive because it comes just two years after Rickenbacker started flying solo; a decade's worth of sizable Franklin County subsidies ended in 2013.

The 2015 surplus isn't huge, but it shows Rickenbacker can stand on its own two feet. This marks another watershed moment in the airport's development into a national cargo hub and local economic engine. And how this book-balancing was achieved is as important as the surplus itself.

The airport is positioning itself for growth by making strategic improvements, financed through public-private partnerships and creative financing. For instance, a long-desired tower for air-traffic control is set to open in spring; the military will staff it and Franklin County chipped in funding.

A new cargo terminal is going up, with funding from L Brands and public grants. The airport authority is working to acquire the old headquarters of a departed cargo airline to give the airport's profitable ground-services a better operations base. Flights from its low-cost passenger airline carrier, Allegiant, have proved popular.

And the airport is more aggressively marketing itself, rebranding the overall area as Rickenbacker Inland Port and hiring a full-time employee to spread the word about its foreign-trade zone advantages that help companies save on import fees.

As *Dispatch* reporter Marla Matzer Rose wrote in a story Wednesday reporting the 2015 surplus: "It's the cargo operations that development officials are most keenly watching. The feeling is that, after years of hard work and investment, Rickenbacker finally is becoming an 'overnight' success."

Kenny McDonald, CEO of Columbus 2020, an economic-development organization, said that Rickenbacker finally is becoming well known. “We’re talking to people around the world about it every day. The last 18 months have become the most important in Rickenbacker’s history.”

The 2015 revenue boost came mostly in the area of airport services, such as cargo handling and fueling. And Rickenbacker benefited from the overall increase in cargo flights, particularly those that serve major local retailers as L Brands and Abercrombie & Fitch.

This also suggests that it has been a good year for these major Columbus-based employers, another silver lining of Rickenbacker’s success.

The story of Rickenbacker, and its “overnight” success, shows the value of elected and civic leaders working together and thinking long-term: Local interests had devised the plan for Rickenbacker after, in a blow to the region, President Jimmy Carter in 1979 announced its closing as an active-duty Air Force base. Franklin County commissioners formed the Rickenbacker Port Authority and worked to obtain the excess federal land and develop it into a jobs-creating industrial park. They footed annual subsidies — in 2003 alone, \$4.3 million —and wondered if their bottle feedings would ever end. But the 2003 merger of Rickenbacker and Port Columbus, under the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, allowed for operational efficiencies.

Savvy management and planning has turned Rickenbacker’s airport and its surrounding warehouse and freight-handling operations into a smart, and now financially stable, investment for taxpayers.