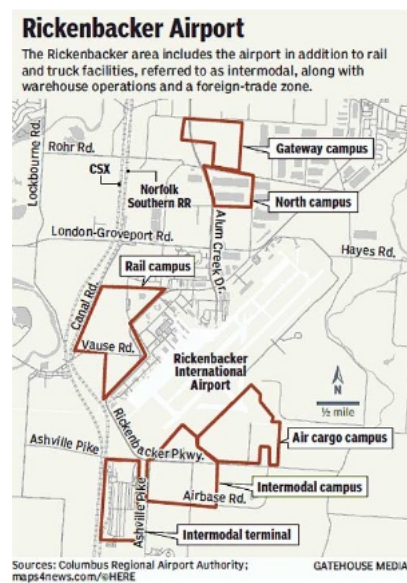


The Columbus Dispatch

Rickenbacker turns record profit after years of deficits



After years of hard work and investment, Columbus officials say Rickenbacker Airport is finally becoming an “overnight” success.



By **Marla Matzer Rose** *The Columbus Dispatch* • Wednesday January 27, 2016 6:00 AM

Buoyed by increases in cargo shipments, Rickenbacker Airport achieved a record \$1.67 million operating surplus last year after years of deficits.

The profit came largely from providing services such as cargo handling and fueling, and was aided by an overall increase in cargo flights, especially ones serving major local retailers such as L Brands and Abercrombie & Fitch.

The 2015 profit came after years of deficits. Rickenbacker relied on millions of dollars in subsidies from Franklin County for a decade after it was merged with Port Columbus under the Columbus Regional Airport Authority in 2003.

Meanwhile, the airport and the so-called "intermodal" cargo hub adjoining it — which handles combinations of shipments via rail, truck and air — continues to develop, though growth has been slower than many had hoped.

The airport authority has rebranded the overall area Rickenbacker Inland Port and has hired an employee to focus solely on selling the advantages of the foreign-trade zone at Rickenbacker, which allows companies to save money on import fees.

Rickenbacker's proximity to a large portion of the U.S. population within one day's drive is a major selling point, along with the hub's low cost of operation compared with cities such as New York and Chicago.

The airport authority originally had forecast a deficit for the year. The surplus represents a nearly \$2 million swing from the prediction going into 2015.

Elaine Roberts, president and CEO of the airport authority, noted that while Rickenbacker has achieved profitability and the outlook is good for growth, "continued partnerships and creative funding solutions will be critical" to maintaining the area's momentum and to continuing to grow the area's \$2 billion annual economic impact and the 20,000 jobs now tied to the area.

As an example, a new air traffic control tower long sought for Rickenbacker finally is set to open in the spring with cooperation from the military, which will staff it, and funding from Franklin County. A new cargo terminal is under construction at the airport with funding from L Brands, as well as public grant money.

Next month, the airport authority plans to bid on the former headquarters of AirNet, a small cargo airline that operated near Rickenbacker and left several years ago. The anticipated \$2.9 million expense would be a capital investment used as an improved base for its profitable ground services there.

While cargo became Rickenbacker's focus under the direction of the airport authority, it has maintained a limited amount of passenger air service. Flights to Florida, New Orleans and other destinations launched by low-cost carrier Allegiant in 2012 have proved popular. The airline this year again plans to increase its number of seasonal flights there, though details have yet to be announced.

But 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.

"It's really started to become a well-known entity around the world. We're talking to people around the world about it every day," said Kenny McDonald, CEO of economic development organization Columbus 2020. "The last 18 months have been the most important in Rickenbacker's history."