

# The Columbus Dispatch

## Port Columbus unveils \$80 million in improvements



Visitors to Port Columbus can see the improvements brought about by the airport's \$80 million renovation project. Part of those improvements bring more color and light into the airport's terminal.



A statue of Jerrie Mock, the first woman to complete a solo flight around the world, honors the former Bexley resident, who began her journey at Port Columbus. Two new lounges in the terminal highlight the history of the airport.

After three years of work, Port Columbus is ready to officially unveil its new look today.

Some travelers have noticed many of the changes already as the airport features a brighter lobby, bigger flight-status screens and new paint, seating, flooring and restrooms, all part of an \$80 million renovation.

The project, which was paid for with capital reserves and facility charges that are assessed on airline tickets at Port Columbus and most other airports, is designed to make the terminal, first opened in 1958, functional until a new terminal is built, which is planned by 2030.

New skylights and recessed lighting in the ticketing lobby bring much more light (and a glimpse of the sky) into the terminal. New terrazzo flooring also brightens the ticket-level lobby, which features two giant new screens on both the north and south ends. The 44-foot by 10-foot screens, which cost \$800,000 each, will pay for themselves within a couple of years by displaying paid advertising, and also will devote a large area on one side to flight arrival and departure information.

Most of the changes are practical: about half the money went to mechanical systems and technology upgrades that aren't seen, but keep the terminal running smoothly. But there also are a few snazzy decorative touches, including two large metal medallions set into the floor in the center of both the arrival and departure floors, featuring a globe and references to Ohio landmarks.

Frequent fliers will appreciate the new features, including three new locally based restaurants (Donatos Pizza, Bob Evans Express and Eddie George's Grille 27) and two added security lanes for Southwest gates. However, they'll have to have a bit more patience with construction. A separate project this spring through fall will make improvements to the curb area at the front of the terminal and add new sliding doors to those entrances.

Over the decades, Port Columbus has seen several significant renovations to the terminal, including projects completed in 1981 and 1998. Instead of unveiling a major renovation today, airport officials could have been opening a completely new terminal nearby if projections from nine years ago had held.

In 2007, the airport was on track for explosive growth because of Skybus Airlines, which was based at Port Columbus from its launch in May of that year until its close in April 2008. A study done at that time foresaw a need for a new terminal by 2016, based on sharply higher passenger numbers.

Passenger figures for the airport hit a record 7.7 million in 2007. Those numbers fell off in the wake of Skybus leaving and airlines being socked with sky-high oil prices. Last year marked the airport's fourth-highest passenger total ever, at 6.79 million.

Elaine Roberts, CEO of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, talks about making the airport a fitting "front door to the community." Some major central Ohio businesses and organizations have joined in this effort: Experience Columbus has designed murals highlighting local attractions for the baggage-claim area, and companies including Nationwide, Express and Huntington Bancshares are paying to advertise in the airport as part of a "One of Us" campaign designed to highlight local employers.

Andy Vasey, president of aviation consultancy Vasey Aviation, said Columbus airport officials continue to take a wise, measured approach to airport development, keeping the terminal up-to-date while avoiding building a debt-inducing "Taj Mahal."

"The leadership at the airport have taken a very sensible approach, instead of going for a very large new project that would greatly increase the cost to airlines," Vasey said. "You want an airport to create a good first impression; airports are the first thing many visitors see, and airports today are regularly ranked, measured and commented on for their amenities."

In addition to passenger needs for the present and coming years, the terminal revamp gives a greater showcase to the airport's legacy. Two long-vacated retail spaces flanking the main entrance on the ticketing level have been turned into "Legacy of Leadership" lounges, with memorabilia and photos, previously on display in a little-seen mezzanine area, dating from the earliest days of Port Columbus in 1929 (at its original terminal on Fifth Avenue) to the present.