

The Columbus Dispatch

John Glenn airport recorded second-busiest year in '16



John Glenn Columbus International Airport served 7.3 million passengers in 2016. Eric Albrecht/Dispatch

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If the airport seemed busier the last time you flew from Columbus, you're right: John Glenn Columbus International Airport recorded its second-busiest year ever last year, serving 7.3 million passengers. That was a 7.8 percent increase over 2015.

And that may just be the beginning. Elaine Roberts, CEO of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, told the board of Experience Columbus last week that 2017 is expected to become the busiest in the airport's history as activity overall continues to increase.

The previous busiest year at John Glenn, renamed from Port Columbus last year, was 2007. That was the year that the short-lived, Columbus-based Skybus Airlines launched.

At Rickenbacker International Airport, international cargo volume was up 16 percent year-over-year, though overall cargo increased by a more modest 1.8 percent, to 202 million pounds. Airport officials said overall cargo tonnage would have increased 14 percent last year except for a limited-time surge in activity in 2015 caused by a West Coast seaport disruption.

"Thanks to the thriving Columbus region economy and numerous collaborative partners ... we're connecting Ohio with the world in more ways than ever before," Roberts in a statement.

For 2016, Southwest Airlines remained the top carrier at John Glenn airport, accounting for 36 percent of the passenger total. It was followed by American Airlines (25 percent), Delta Air Lines (22 percent) and United Airlines (13 percent).

Frontier Airlines, an ultra-low-cost airline, accounted for 2 percent of passengers at the airport. It launched in June, serving a handful of cities several times a week from John Glenn.

Mid-sized airports such as John Glenn are finding it increasingly difficult to attract new service from the major carriers, especially for longer-haul destinations. Columbus development officials have joined those in other cities in putting up revenue guarantees to secure new service; Southwest added an Oakland, California, flight from Columbus on that basis.

Columbus airport officials remain focused on adding more service to West Coast destinations, including Seattle and San Diego, which are currently without nonstop service from Columbus, as well as securing a flight to a European gateway city such as London.



Tammy Krings, CEO of New Albany corporate travel firm ATG (AllStars Travel Group), told The Dispatch last year that attracting overseas service is a must if Columbus is to increase its stature in the business world.

"If Columbus wants to be on the international map as the capital of Ohio ... we have to have international service," she said. "Without it, we'll continue to bring jobs here, but it will be the warehouses, call centers ... the kinds of jobs that don't rely on executive travel."

Southwest has pursued business travelers more in recent years, though some corporations still prefer the traditional "mainline" carriers. Low-budget carriers Frontier and Allegiant Air, which fly at Rickenbacker, have added the majority of new flights in Columbus in the past year, but are targeted mainly at leisure travelers, with two to three flights a week and often serving popular vacation markets.