

# The Columbus Dispatch

## Southwest has become John Glenn Airport's biggest carrier in its 25 years here



Sunday will mark the 25th anniversary of Southwest Airlines launching service in Columbus. It now flies to 17 cities from John Glenn Columbus International Airport and serves 38 percent of the airport's passengers. [Barbara J. Perenic/Dispatch]



Southwest Airlines has distinguished itself from other carriers by not adding fees for up to two checked bags; using only full-sized planes; and not charging passengers for rescheduling flights. [Barbara J. Perenic/Dispatch]

# Nonstop growth

A quarter-century after entering the Columbus market, Southwest Airlines offers daily nonstop flights to each of the cities shown.



Note: Southwest currently offers a weekly nonstop flight to New Orleans, and plans daily seasonal service to Houston beginning in November.

Sources: [flycolumbus.com](http://flycolumbus.com), [maps4news.com/](http://maps4news.com/) ©HERE

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Next

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By [Marla Rose](#)

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When Southwest Airlines began service in Columbus 25 years ago, it offered just two destinations: Chicago and St. Louis.

The airline's legendary co-founder Herb Kelleher came to town that week, making a commitment to add flights and keep fares reasonable.

The airline industry has seen many changes in that time, including the birth and demise of several airlines and the renaming of Port Columbus to John Glenn Columbus International Airport. Through it all, Southwest has grown in prominence and popularity among local air travelers.

Today, it serves 17 cities on a daily basis and has long since become the biggest passenger carrier in Columbus, serving about 38 percent of passengers at John Glenn airport.

“Columbus is one of fewer than a quarter of the 102 cities that we serve where we've declared we want to be the 'Hometown Carrier,’” said Carter Ganss, director of business development for Southwest. “It's a market where we plan to continue looking for opportunities to add service.”

Southwest serves popular vacation destinations such as the major Florida cities and Las Vegas, but also has helped fill some service gaps that local airport and economic-development officials say are key to boosting the central Ohio economy.

The addition of Boston and Oakland, California — with the latter serving the San Francisco area — to Southwest's route map from Columbus in 2015 illustrates two positive aspects of having Southwest as a major carrier.

Fares quickly fell on the Columbus-Boston route when Southwest entered, triggering what's referred to as the “Southwest effect.” That is, when Southwest starts service on a route that's previously been controlled by a single carrier, air fares almost always fall immediately. In Columbus, Delta Air Lines had previously had the Boston route to itself.

“We’ve increased the market (the number of people flying nonstop to Boston) by 60 percent, and fares are down 40 percent,” Ganss said. “It’s a classic example of what we come into a market to try to do.”

As for Oakland, no other carriers had served the San Francisco area nonstop from Columbus since short-lived Skybus Airlines left the route in 2008. Given its commitment to the Columbus market, Southwest agreed — with the aid of revenue guarantees courtesy of city, county and the private sector — to add the once-daily flight.

In a move that many mid-sized cities are making, the city of Columbus and Franklin County pledged a combined \$1.7 million toward securing the flight for its first two years. The airport also offered incentives in waived landing fees and marketing reimbursements valued at \$225,000.

The commitment came after a task force estimated the flight could bring in \$20 million annually in economic benefits to central Ohio.

Development officials have declined to say how much if any of the revenue-guarantee money has been paid out. The flight, which originally left Columbus before 6 a.m. each day, initially struggled to fill all its seats, but has since seen an increase in passengers. The flight will hit the two-year mark in early August.

Such deals can be a wise move for a city seeking air service today, said Andrew Vasey, an Indianapolis-based airline consultant.

“Quality, nonstop destinations are tough to come by these days,” Vasey said. “The legacy airlines (such as Delta and American) remain dedicated to the hub system. Southwest tends to bring a lot of nonstop destinations by flying more ‘point to point.’ ”

Southwest also distinguishes itself from so-called legacy carriers by flying only full-sized planes, by not charging for checked bags (up to two per person), and by allowing passengers to reschedule flights at no cost. Such fees have become an important revenue source for other airlines.

Southwest has been an indispensable partner in the growth of the Columbus airport, said David Whitaker, vice president of business development for the Columbus Regional Airport Authority.

“They’re a steady, long-term player. They bring high-quality air service at a very competitive price. They do right by the airport and the community,” he said, citing the airlines’ charitable activities and reputation for customer service.

Though Southwest’s 17 destinations connect Columbus passengers to many important markets, there’s a missing link. It currently doesn’t offer local travelers service to New York.

Ganss said Southwest would like to consider adding service to LaGuardia from Columbus as it gets more “slots” at the New York airport, which has limited capacity. Southwest connected Indianapolis to LaGuardia, for example, in 2015.

For the near term, Southwest isn’t in growth mode because of a limited number of planes. There’s a plan to retire more than 100 older ones and await the arrival of new ones starting later next year.

However, the airline is finding ways to add limited service: It just launched once-weekly flights between Columbus and New Orleans and will start limited, seasonal service to Houston in November.

Whitaker said the airport’s wish list for added service from Columbus includes San Diego, San Francisco and Milwaukee.

There aren’t any birthday cakes planned for Sunday, the actual 25th anniversary date for Southwest in Columbus, but there are plans for some celebrating at John Glenn airport later this month.

The biggest gift for central Ohio travelers, though, would be new flights and destinations at a time when the major airlines, now consolidated to just three, don’t seem inclined to add flights at non-hub airports such as John Glenn.