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Des Moines airport counters the national trend for passenger growth

Additional capacity, competitive prices make local flights more attractive for Iowans

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The Des Moines airport is serving passengers at a record pace that could top 2 million this year, and the numbers could surge even higher with the arrival of discount carrier Southwest Airlines this fall.

Industry officials attribute the passenger growth to a combination of an improved Iowa economy and existing air carriers adding capacity. Another key factor is the introduction of more competitive fares that are persuading Iowans to begin their journeys closer to home instead of driving to airports in Kansas City, Omaha and Minneapolis-St. Paul.

"We think there has been pent-up demand in central Iowa, and as fuel prices have come down and airlines have lowered their pricing, cut loose," said Kevin Foley, general manager of the Des Moines airport.

A total of 820,506 travelers passed through the Des Moines airport from January through May, up nearly 10 percent from last year.

That puts the airport in a position to surpass 2004, its best year, when it served 1.99 million passengers.

Foley believes airport business could improve even more when Southwest Airlines begins operations in Des Moines on Sept. 30, offering one-way bargain fares to Chicago as low as \$88.

Passenger growth in Des Moines counters the national trend. The number of flights

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The airport handled 61.9 million pounds of cargo through May, a 28 percent increase over the first five months of 2011.

Airport General Manager Kevin Foley said he suspects Iowa's strong agricultural economy is a factor behind the growth, with increased shipments of farm machinery parts and other ag-related items.

Mike Mangeot, a spokesman for United Parcel Service, said his company doesn't disclose specific market data. But he said UPS "definitely noted an uptick" in domestic shipping volume in

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the first quarter of 2012.

“Not only is Des Moines an important Midwest market for UPS, it’s a strategic stopover for our airline,” Mangeot said. “We’ll have as many as six flights a day in and out of the city to help fan out volume to the region.”

A spokesman for FedEx Corp. also said he didn’t have specific market data. But he said FedEx continues to have three flights daily into Des Moines.

CEDAR RAPIDS SEES GROWTH, TOO

At the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids, the state’s second-largest commercial airport, business also has been on the upswing, said Tim Bradshaw, airport director.

For the first five months this year, the Cedar Rapids airport had 397,652 passengers, an increase of 13 percent over the same period last year.

One factor is that the Quad City Airport in Moline, Ill., which is a major competitor to Cedar Rapids, has lost AirTran air service, which has resulted in a return of customers to Cedar Rapids, Bradshaw said. Another is that the Cedar Rapids economy has been doing well, he said.

“Unemployment is low here, and a lot of money is being pumped into the economy here post-flood,” Bradshaw said, referring to a 2008 flood that devastated a wide swath of the city. He also noted that Frontier Airlines established service in Cedar Rapids in May.

“I am optimistic, but I am also being cautious,” Bradshaw said. “The volatility of fuel prices is one thing that airlines keep telling us holds them back. Another Mideast crisis or something else could shoot fuel prices back through the roof, so that always keeps me cautious.”

nationally has dipped slightly, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Des Moines is also doing better than several major Midwest airports, according to a spot check by the Register. The Minneapolis-St. Paul airport was up less than 1 percent in passenger traffic through May. Chicago O’Hare airport had a 4.1 percent increase in passenger volume through April. Meanwhile, passenger traffic at the Omaha airport was down 2.9 percent through May.

Growth downside: Security line waits

The increase in business has created a few headaches for airport officials. The Transportation Security Administration said it has heard complaints from travelers who have routinely had to wait 20 to 25 minutes or longer to be screened during an early-morning rush that usually occurs from 5 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. The federal agency has responded by adding a fifth security lane in the terminal, which began operating on Sunday.

“We are going to take a chunk out of that waiting time. It may take a week or two to work the bugs out, but it is certainly going to help,” said Jay Brainard, the airport’s federal security director.

As long as air fares are competitive, many central Iowa residents say they like using the Des Moines airport, which is accessible and offers easy parking.

Steve Flood of Des Moines, senior vice president at Holmes, Murphy and Associates, was up early last week to catch a morning flight to Eugene, Ore., to watch his daughter, Katie, run in the U.S. Olympic trials. He travels a couple of times a month. He said the airport’s security screening could be more efficient, but he accepts some inconvenience as a consequence of the increase in passengers.

“It’s still much easier here than pretty much any other airport that I have ever been to,” Flood said.

Sarah Wyckoff of Des Moines is another road warrior, regularly



Gabby Douglas in Olympic Trials



Fun at Adventureland

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flying out of the Des Moines airport to Dallas and Columbus, Ohio, as part of her job with Nationwide Insurance. However, last week she was flying to Los Angeles to have fun at the beach. She was joined by her children, Catherine, 8, Nikolas, 4 and Isaiah, 2.

Wyckoff is a big fan of the Des Moines airport.

"I love it. It's easy to get in, and easy to get out," she said.

Fueling trend: More flights, bigger jets

Air carriers serving Des Moines began adding capacity last fall, bringing in bigger jets and offering more daily flights. For example, instead of flying 50-seat regional jets, some carriers have upgraded to Boeing jetliners that seat more than 100 people. The airport now offers about 14,000 airline seats daily, up 4,000 seats from just six to eight months ago.

The decision to use larger aircraft is in part an economic move because smaller regional jets are not cost-effective when fuel prices rise.

As air carriers have added capacity, they have tended to hold down fares because they want to fill their seats, which has resulted in more passenger traffic, Foley said. He also suspects the lower fares are a response to competitive pressures stemming from the impending arrival of Southwest.

The Des Moines airport is now more competitive on fares with some surrounding Midwest airports, especially when considering additional driving expenses, although not for every flight.

For example, a Frontier Airlines one-way flight offered last week from Des Moines to Denver on Aug. 1 cost \$91, while a flight from Kansas City to Denver cost \$90. An American Airlines one-way ticket the same day from Des Moines to Los Angeles, via Chicago, cost \$231, while an American flight from Omaha to Los Angeles, via Dallas-Fort Worth, was offered for \$227.

Des Moines fliers cite convenience

Tom and Ashley DeWaard of Mason City were traveling with three children last week for a vacation to Yosemite National Park. Instead of using the Mason City airport or driving to Minneapolis-St. Paul, they drove to Des Moines for a flight to Fresno, Calif., via Phoenix. They stayed overnight with relatives, getting up at 4:30 a.m. so they could board an early-morning plane.

"It is more expensive to fly out of Mason City, and it is more convenient to fly out of Des Moines than it is to fly out of Minneapolis," said Ashley DeWaard. "It is a lot smaller here. That's nice."

Phyllis Shappell, owner of Journeys Travel Agency in Des Moines,

which specializes in destination weddings and vacation packages, said she's not surprised to hear business has been on the upswing at the Des Moines airport. She's had lots of interest from central Iowa residents who want to travel to places like the Bahamas, Cancun and Jamaica.

"I can definitely tell you that travel is up. I think people feel more secure in their jobs. The economy is starting to pick up," Shappell said.

At Great Southern Travel in West Des Moines, manager Beth Newhard said customers are already booking trips for next year to the Caribbean and Mexico. "Spring break is hot," she said.

Chris and Jody Bauer of Urbandale were flying out of Des Moines last Wednesday to Raleigh, N.C., for a cousin's wedding. They said they usually check ticket prices at other airports, but think the prices in Des Moines are reasonable, especially when factoring in travel time, car mileage and fuel expenses.

"We always enjoy just going straight home when we get back rather than having to drive back from Omaha or Kansas City," Chris Bauer said.

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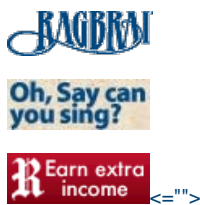
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