The Development Cycles of Long Island MacArthur Airport

By Robert G. Waldvogel

Long Island MacArthur Airport, located on 1,310 acres in Suffolk County, Long Island, is the region's only commercial service facility, which has, for most of its existence, struggled with identity and purpose, operating in the shadows of both JFK International and La Guardia.

Its second, oval-shaped, 50,000 square-foot passenger terminal opened in 1966 and, sporting two opposing, ramp-accessing gates, had exuded a small, hometown atmosphere — so much so, in fact, that scenes from the original *Out-of-Towners* movie were filmed in it.

Its subsequent expansion, resulting in a 1,000% increase in passenger terminal area and some two million annual passengers, was sporadic and cyclic, characterized by new airline establishment, which always sparked a sequence of passenger attraction, new nonstop route implementation and additional carriers, before declining conditions kindled a reverse trend. During cycle peaks, check-in, gate, and ramp space were at a premium, while during troughs, a pin drop could be heard on the terminal floor.

Its catch-22 struggle always entailed the circular argument of carriers reluctant to provide service to the airport because of a lack of passengers and passengers reluctant to use the airport because of a lack of service.

This, in essence, is the force that shaped its seven-decade history. And this, in essence, is Long Island MacArthur Airport's story.

Origins

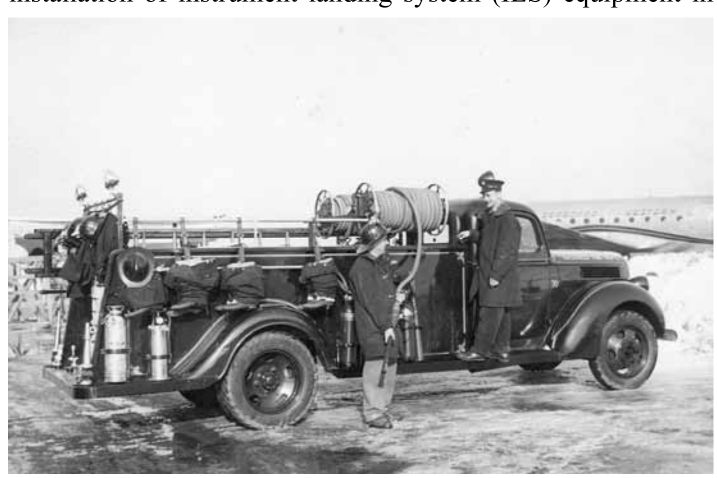
The 1938 Civil Aeronautics Act, under Section 303, authorized federal fund expenditure for landing areas provided the administrator could certify "that such landing areas were reasonably necessary for use in air commerce or in the interests of national defense."

At the outbreak of WWII, Congress appropriated $40 million for the Development of Landing Areas for National Defense or "DLAND," of which the Development Civil Landing Areas (DCLA) was an extension. Because civil aviation was initially perceived as an "appendage" of its military branch, it was considered a "segment" of the national defense system, thus garnering direct federal government civil airport support. Local governments provided land and subsequently maintained and operated the airports. Construction of 200 such airfields began in 1941.

A Long Island regional airport, located in Islip, was one of them. On September 16, 1941, the Town of Islip – the intended owner and operator of the initially named *Islip Airport* – sponsored the project under an official resolution designated Public Law 78-216, providing the land, while the federal government agreed to plan and build the actual airport. The one-year, $1.5 million construction project, initiated in 1942, resulted in an airfield with three 5,000-foot runways and three ancillary taxiways. Although it fulfilled its original military purpose, it had always been intended for public utilization.

Despite increased instrument-based flight training after installation of instrument landing system (ILS) equipment in

Suffolk County's first air mail flight departed Islip Airport on May 19, 1938, with pilot William Theis flying a Travel Air 6000B. This airport was later abandoned in favor of the airport constructed under the DCLA extension to the DLAND act. (Photo from the Dick Milligan collection)



Lockheed was a major tenant and help provide fire protections service until their departure in 1950. (Photo courtesy of MacArthur Airport Administration)

In 1963, the FAA built this seven floor tower, which also housed the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center.

1947, the regional facility failed to fulfill projected expectations of becoming New York's major airport after the subsequent construction of Idlewild. Losing Lockheed as a major tenant in 1950, the since-renamed MacArthur Airport, in honor of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, would embark on a long development path before that would occur.

Initial Service

A 5,000-square-foot passenger terminal and restaurant, funded by the federal government, and including needed infrastructure for efficient servicing and public use,was constructed in 1949. The airport, surrounded by local community growth, sought its first public air service by petitioning the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB).

Islip actually attempted to attract scheduled airline service as far back as 1956. The first to provide it was Gateway Airlines that commenced air-taxi operations three years later, with a fleet of 11-passenger de Havilland Doves and 15-passenger de Havilland Herons to Boston, Newark, and Washington. Inadequate financing, however, led to its premature termination only eight months later.

The airport, which had only 20 aircraft based there at this time, annually fielded some 30,000 movements. Allegheny Airlines subsequently received full scheduled passenger service route authority from the CAB in 1960 and inaugurated four daily Convair and Martinliner round-trips to Boston, Philadelphia and Washington in September, carrying more than 19,000 passengers in 1961, its first full year of operations.

In 1963, the FAA opened the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center and a seven-floor control tower, and in 1966, a $1.3 million, 50,000 square-foot oval terminal replaced the original rectangular facility.

Mohawk, granted the second CAB route authority that year, inaugurated Fairchild Hiller FH-227 service to Albany, and the two scheduled airlines were annually

The original square terminal building was replaced in 1966 with an oval-shaped, 50,000 sq.ft. main building.

carring some 110,000 passengers from the since renamed Islip MacArthur Airport by 1969. The 210 aircraft based there recorded 240,000 yearly movements.

The runways and taxiways were progressively expanded, partly in response to Eastern's and Pan Am's designation of the airport as an "alternate" on their flight plans.

First Major Carrier Service

Long envisioned as a reliever airport to JFK and La Guardia, which would provide limited, but important nonstop service to key U.S. cities and hubs, such as Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and the major Florida destinations, the Long Island airport urgently needed additional, major-airline service, but this goal remained elusive.

This challenge, however, was fullfilled on April 26, 1971, when American Airlines inaugurated 727-100 "Astrojet" service to Chicago-O'Hare, Islip's first pure-jet and first trunk carrier operation, permitting same-day, round-trip business travel and eliminating the otherwise required La Guardia commute. Because of American's major-carrier prestige, it attracted both attention and passengers, indicating that Islip had attained "large airport" status, and the Chicago route, now the longest nonstop route from the airfield,

Allegheny Airlines added MacArthur to their route structure in 1960 with daily Convair and Martinliner service. (Photo courtesy of MacArthur Airport Administration)

MacArthur Airport entered the jet-age in 1971 with American Airlines 727 "Astrojet" service to Chicago, Illinois. (Photo courtesy of MacArthur Airport Administration)

provided a vital lifeline to a primary, Midwestern city and to American's route system, offering numerous flight connections.

The route was quickly followed in the summer with the inauguration of Allegheny DC-9-30 service to Providence and Washington, while Altair launched Beech B99 and Nord N.262 turboprop flights to Bridgeport and Philadelphia two years later.

American, Allegheny (which, in 1972, had merged with Mohawk), and Altair provided the established Long Island air connections during the 1970s.

In order to reflect its regional location, the facility, for the fourth time, was renamed, adopting the title of Long Island MacArthur Airport in 1978.

During most of the 1970s, it handled an annual average of 225,000 passengers. Allegheny, the premier operator, offered nine daily pure-jet BAC-111 and DC-9-30 departures during 1978.

By March 1982, USAir, the rebranded Allegheny Airlines, was its only remaining pure-jet carrier with daily DC-9-30 service to Albany and BAC-111-200 flights to Washington-National, perhaps emphasizing its ability to profitably operate from small community airfields with its properly sized twin-jet equipment.

The early 1980s were characterized by commuter-regional carrier dominance, with operations provided by Pilgrim, New Haven Airlines, Altair, Air North, Mall Airways and Ransome. The latter, first flying as part of the Allegheny Commuter consortium, later operated independently under its own name in affiliation with Delta Air Lines, offering 17 daily Mohawk M-298 (improved Nord 262 with Pratt & Whitney PT6A engines) and DHC-7 departures to seven regional cities.

Aside from Ransome, it often appeared as if the airport's regional airline floodgates had been opened: Suburban/Allegheny Commuter, Southern Jersey/Allegheny Commuter, Empire and Henson (the Piedmont regional airline) all descended on its runways. Precision, which inaugurated multiple-daily Dornier Do-228-200 services to both Boston and Philadelphia, operated independently, later as Precision-Eastern Express, and finally as Precision-Northwest Airlink. It was the only airline to simultaneously offer scheduled service from neighboring Republic Airport in Farmingdale, primarily a general aviation field.

Allegeheny followed quickly with DC-9-30 service to Providence, R.I., and Washington, D.C. (Photo courtesy of MacArthur Airport Administration)

Northeastern International Airlines

Market studies long indicated the need for non-stop Long Island-Florida service to facilitate visits between Long Island children and their retired, Florida-relocated parents, as well as to provide a regional departure point for those visiting Florida's tourist attractions.

Deregulation, the very force behind multiple-airline creation, divergent service and fare concepts, and the relative ease of new market entry, had spawned Northeastern International, which was founded to provide high-density, low-fare, limited-amenity service, and fulfilled the idealized nonstop, Long Island-Florida connection when it inaugurated operations on February 11, 1982, with a former Evergreen International DC-8-50. Service initially offered four weekly round-trips to Fort Lauderdale and one to Orlando. After a second aircraft was acquired, it was able to record a 150,000 passenger movements during its first year of service, with 32,075 having been boarded in December alone.

Although Northeastern's corporate headquarters were located in Fort Lauderdale, its operational base was established at Long Island MacArthur. It ultimately served Fort Lauderdale, Hartford, Miami, Orlando and St. Petersburgh with the two DC-8s and two former Pan Am 727-100s with seven daily departures. Incorporating both the charter carrier strategy of operating high-density, single-class, low-fare service, and the major airline strategy of flying large-capacity aircraft, Northeastern actually served a very competitive route – that of New York-to-Florida – without incurring any competition at all by operating directly from Islip.

By 1984, with Northeastern having served as a catalyst, 11 airlines served the airport, inclusive of Allegheny Commuter, American, Eastern, Empire, Henson, NewAir, Northeastern, Pilgrim, Ransome, United and USAir, relieving JFK and La Guardia of air traffic, directly serving the Long Island market and

American Airlines also used Convair CV-240s to service MacArthur. Seen here is N94252 arriving at an unknown date. (Photo courtesy of the MacArthur Airport Administration)

United Air Lines flew a DC-6B in to the airport for a marketing promotion, but it is not known if they operated this type there on a regular basis. (Photo courtesy of the MacArthur Airport Administration)

fulfilling the airport's originally envisioned role of becoming New York's secondary commercial facility. Simultaneously providing nonstop service to Chicago O'Hare from Islip, American and United both competed for the same passenger base.

By 1986, Long Island MacArthur, for the first time in its 36-year scheduled history, handled one million passengers in a single year, a level equaled or exceeded for some two decades.

To cater to the explosive growth demand and ease its now-overstrained passenger facilities, the Town of Islip embarked on a progressive terminal facility improvement program, which initially encompassed the addition of two commuter aircraft gates, the enclosure of the former curbside front awning, and two glass-enclosed wings — the west for the now-covered baggage carousel and the east for the three relocated rental-car counters and the Austin Travel agency. Additionally, the internal roadway was realigned and extra parking spaces were created.

A more ambitious $3.2 million terminal expansion program occurring in 1990, resulted in two jetbridge-lined concourses that extended from the airfield side of the oval terminal, adding 22,700 square feet of space. Runway 6-24's 1,000-foot extension, to 7,000 feet, was subsequently completed three years later after a decade of primarily local resident resistance due to anticipated noise increases.

By the end of 1990, the transformation of Long Island MacArthur Airport from a small, hometown airfield associated with a couple of operators to a major facility served by most of the major carriers was complete.

A number of conclusions could already be drawn from the airport's hitherto 30-year scheduled history.

1. Allegheny-USAir, along with its regional subsidiaries, Allegheny Commuter and USAir Express, had provided the initial spark that led to the present growth explosion and was the only consistent, anchor carrier during its three-decade scheduled service history between 1960 and 1990. During this time it had absorbed other Islip operators, including of the original Mohawk and Piedmont, the latter of which had also intermittently acquired Empire and Henson, and shed still others, such as Ransome Airlines, which, as an independent carrier, almost established a regional, turboprop hub at MacArthur.
2. Three carriers had been key to its three-decade evolution: Allegheny-USAir, which had reserved the distinction of being Long Island MacArthur's first, largest and, for a period, only pure-jet operator; American, which had changed its image by associating it with large trunk-carrier prestige; and Northeastern, whose bold, innovative service inauguration and low fares had been directly responsible for its latest, unceasing growth cycle.
3. Many airlines, unaware of the facility's traffic potential, never permanently abandoned the air field, including American and Eastern, which both suspended operations, but subsequently returned; Northeastern, which re-established Long Island routes after two bankruptcies; United, which had discontinued its own service, yet maintained a presence through two separate regional airline affiliations—Presidential-United Express and Atlantic Coast-United Express—thus continuing to link its Washington-Dulles hub; Continental, which had returned through its own commuter agreement; and Pilgrim, which, despite service discontinuation, had maintained an autonomous check-in counter, where it handled other carriers until it itself had reinstated service.
4. Of the approximately 30 airlines that had served Long Island MacArthur, many had indirectly retained a presence either through name-change, other-carrier absorption, or regional-airline two-letter code-share agreements.
5. The Northeastern forged air link between Long Island and Florida had, despite its own final bankruptcy, never been lost, with other carriers always filling the void, including Eastern, Carnival, the third Braniff, Delta Express and Spirit Airlines.

Because of its market fragility the Long Island regional airport was far more vulnerable to economic cycles than the primary New York airports were to periods of recession that often resulted in the exodus of carriers in search of more profitable routes. In 1994, for example, three airlines discontinued service and one ceased operating altogether.

A $13.2 million expansion program of the 32-year old, multiply-renovated oval terminal, funded by a passenger facility charge (PFC) generated revenue, was initiated in the spring of 1998 and completed in August of the following year, resulting in a 62,000-square-foot area increase. The enlarged, reconfigured structure included the addition of two wings – the west with four baggage carousels, three rental car counters, and several airline baggage service offices, and the east with 48 (as opposed to the previous 20) passenger check-in positions.

The original, oval-shaped structure now housed an enlarged newsstand and gift shop and the relocated central security checkpoint, but retained the departures level snack bar, the upper level Skyway Café and cocktail lounge, and the twin, jetbridge-provisioned concourses added during the 1990 expansion phase, while the aircraft parking ramp had been progressively increased until the last blade of grass had been transformed into concrete. A realigned entrance road, an extension of the existing short-term parking lot, 1,000 additional parking spaces, and a quasi-parking lot system subdivided into employee, resident, hourly, daily, and economy (long-term) sections completed the renovation. Shuttle bus service between the parking lot and the terminal was provided for the first time.

Southwest Airlines

An effort to attract Southwest Airlines began in late 1996 when the rapidly expanding, highly profitable, low-fare carrier contemplated service to a third northeast city after Manchester and Providence. Airports under consideration were Newburgh's Stewart International and White Plains' Westchester County in New York; Hartford and New Haven in Connecticut; and Teterboro and Trenton's Mercer County in New Jersey. All were smaller, secondary airports characteristic of Southwest's route system. It even briefly explored service to Farmingdale's Republic Airport on Long Island and Teterboro in New Jersey, both of which were noncommercial, general aviation fields with business jet concentrations. Three airports offered terminal improvements in exchange for the service. But Long Island MacArthur was ultimately selected because of the 1.6 million residents living within a 20-mile radius of the airport, local business health, and, according to Southwest's then-chief executive officer, Herb Kelleher, "underserved, overpriced air service" which was "ripe for competition."

Following initial Southwest interest in 1997, then Town of Islip Supervisor Peter McGowan and other officials flew to Dallas, where Herb Kelleher stated the need for the previously described terminal and parking facility expansions before operations could begin. Although the meeting was positive, it ended with nothing more than a symbolic handshake.

The nearly two-year effort to entice the airline culminated in the December 1998 announcement of Southwest's intended March 14, 1999, service launch with 12 daily Boeing 737 departures, including eight to Baltimore, two to Chicago-Midway, one to Nashville, and one to Tampa – all of which would provide through or connecting service to 29 other Southwest-served cities. Although the low-fare flights were expected to attract some passengers who would otherwise have flown from JFK or La Guardia airports, they were primarily targeted at the Long Island market and, as a byproduct, were expected to attract an increased airport traffic base, additional carriers, and generate an estimated $500,000 per year for the Town of Islip. Two Southwest-dedicated gates accommodated up to 20 daily departures – eight more than the inaugural flight schedule included – before additional facilities would be required. The Islip station, staffed by 44, represented its 53rd destination in 27 states.

Southwest thus provided the fourth spark in Long Island MacArthur Airport's airline and passenger attraction cycle, traced as follows:

In 1990 the oval terminal was expanded to include the two jetbridge-lined concourses that extend from the rear along the ramp area. Additional growth during this decade drove the addition of the wings to the front of the oval terminal to facilitate baggage handling, rental car facilities and ticketing. These were completed in 1999.

1. The original air taxi Gateway Airlines service of 1959 and the initial scheduled Allegheny Airlines service of 1960.
2. The first trunk-carrier, pure-jet American Airlines flights of 1971.
3. The first low-fare, nonstop Northeastern International Florida service of 1982.
4. The first low-fare, high frequency, major-carrier Southwest service of 1999.

American, the last of the original, major carriers to vacate the airport, left it with three predominant types of airlines as the millennium approached:

1. The turboprop commuter airline serving the non-hub destinations, such as Albany, Boston, Buffalo, Hartford and Newburgh.
2. The regional jet operator feeding its major-carrier affiliate at one of its hubs, such as ASA feeding Delta in Atlanta, Comair connecting with Delta in Cincinnati, and Continental Express integrating its flight schedule with Continental in Cleveland.
3. The low-fare, high-density, no-frills carrier operating the leisure-oriented sectors to Florida. As of December 1, 1999, three airlines, inclusive of Delta Express, Southwest and Spirit, operated 15 daily departures to five Florida destinations.

Long Island MacArthur's expansion and passenger facility improvements, Southwest's service inauguration, and the attraction of other carriers collectively resulted in a 113% increase in passenger boardings in 1999 compared to the year-earlier period. The figure, which was only shy of the two million mark, was the highest in the Long Island airport's four-decade commercial history. Southwest carried 34% of this total.

Eleven airlines provided service during this period: ASA Atlantic Southeast, American, Business Express, Comair, CommutAir/US Airways Express, Continental Express, Delta Express, Piedmont/US Airways Express, Shuttle America, Spirit and Southwest itself.

Less than two weeks after Southwest had secured a third gate and increased its daily departures to 22, it announced, in a unprecedented move, its intention to self-finance 90% of a $42 million expansion of the East Concourse in order to construct four additional, dedicated gates and overnight parking positions by the end of 2001, thus increasing the airport's current 19-gate total to 23.

The concourse extension, intended to provide it with both increased employee and passenger room, would permit its existing three gates to be used by other-carriers, while its new four-gate facility would permit a service increase to some 30 daily flights based upon future passenger demand, aircraft availability and Town of Islip approved departure increases.

The expansion marked the seventh such development of the original terminal, as follows:

1. The original oval terminal construction.
2. The partially enclosed arrivals baggage belt installation.
3. The construction of two commuter gates.
4. The enclosure of the front awning, which entailed the relocation of the rental car companies and the Austin Travel agency, and the installation of an enlarged, fully enclosed baggage belt.
5. The construction of the jetbridge-equipped east and west concourses.
6. The construction of the West Arrivals Wing and the East Departures Wing, the gift shop expansion, and the central security checkpoint relocation.
7. The Southwest-financed, quad-gate addition, increasing the number of departure gates to 23.

Victim, like all airports, to post-September 11 traffic declines, Long Island MacArthur Airport lost eight daily departures operated by American Eagle, Delta Express and US Airways Express, although the airport's October 2001 passenger figures were only six percent below those of the year-earlier period. No non-stop destinations, however, were lost. With Delta Express's daily B737-200 Florida flight frequency having been progressively reduced from an all-time high of seven to just one – to Fort Lauderdale – its operations could be divided into three categories:

1. Turboprop regional
2. Pure-jet regional
3. Southwest

Nevertheless, in the four years since Southwest had inaugurated service, the airport handled 8,220,790 passengers, or an annual average of two million. Without Southwest, passenger service at best, would have handled only half that amount.

On April 30, 2003, for the second time in a five-year period, Long Island MacArthur Airport broke ground on new terminal facilities. Designed by the Baldassano Architectural Group, the Long Island architectural firm that had completed the $13.2 million airport expansion and modernization program in 1999, the new, 154,000-square-foot, four-gate addition was constructed on the north side of the existing east concourse that housed Southwest's operations. Citing increased space and potential growth as reasons for the new facility, Southwest claimed that the existing three gates, which fielded a combined 24 daily departures, had reached their saturation point and that additional "breathing room" for both passengers and employees was needed, particularly during flight delays. The net gain of an additional gate, which would be coupled with larger lounges, would eventually facilitate eight additional flights to new or existing U.S. destinations, based upon market demand.

The project, initially pegged at $42 million, but later increased to $62 million, was financed by Southwest, which sought government reimbursement with the Town of Islip for up to $18 million for the non-airline specific construction aspects,

By 2003, growth spurred another terminal expansion with the addition of four gates on the north end of the east concourse (top of photo) and the connection of them to the front eastern wing of the terminal. The bulk of this expansion being paid for by Southwest Airlines. (2011 photo by Charles Eckert)

such as airfield drainage, which was considered a common-use utility.

The 114,254-square-foot, Southwest-funded and -- named Peter J. McGowan Concourse officially opened at the end of November 2004. Accessed by a new awning-protected entrance from the airport's terminal-fronted curbside, the new wing, connected to the existing passenger check-in area, curved to the left past the flight arrival and departure television monitors to the new, large security checkpoint from where passengers ascended, via two escalators, to the upper level departures area.

Concurrent with the opening was the announcement that Southwest would now proceed with Phase II of its expansion by building a second $20 million addition that would connect the new concourse with the old, altogether replacing the east concourse which had served it since it had inaugurated service in 1999. The project incorporated four more gates, for a total of eight, facilitating the operation of up to 80 daily departures.

New Leadership, Service Reductions, and Infrastructure Improvements

The end of the 2000 decade, characterized by new leadership, airline service reductions, and infrastructure investments, once again signaled a reversal in Long Island MacArthur Airport's development cycle.

Long-time Airport Commissioner Al Werner, who had grown up in nearby Bayport, served in the air force, and become an air traffic controller in the MacArthur tower in 1951, retired on November 16, 2007, after 53 years, passing the torch to Teresa Rizzuto. Accepted after a three-month, nationwide search conducted by Islip Supervisor Phil Nolan, she brought considerable airline industry experience with her, having commenced her aviation career as a United Airlines ramp service agent at JFK in 1992. Promoted, six years later, to United's terminal manager at Newark Liberty International Airport, she fielded 36 daily United flights, along with those of six other carriers, which resulted in a five million annual passenger throughput and for which she was given a $30 million budget, while still later she was in charge of 1,600 employees as a United hub manager at Washington-Dulles International Airport. Comparatively, Islip offered 36 daily flights, which carried some two million yearly passengers, with an associated $8.9 million budget.

Appointed Long Island MacArthur Airport Commissioner on February 5, 2008, after a Town of Islip Board vote, she was entrusted with heralding the regional facility into the next decade whose multi-faceted agenda necessarily included the following goals:

1. Devise a marketing plan to increase airport recognition, thereby attracting a larger passenger base.
2. Establish new, nonstop routes of existing carriers and attract new airlines able to compete with low-cost Southwest, to provide the required core service for this enlarged passenger base, yet avoid alienating local residents because of excessive noise.
3. Invest in infrastructure modernization and development, particularly on the airport's general aviation west side.
4. Increase revenues for the Town of Islip, the airport's owner and operator.

Long Island MacArthur's very existence relied upon its ability to serve its customers' needs, and both destination and airline reductions during the latter part of the decade, coupled with flickering, but quickly extinguished glimmers of new-carrier hope, only obviated its purpose.

Exploratory talks in 2007, with Southwest-modeled, Ireland based-Ryanair, for instance, would have resulted in both the airport's first international and first transatlantic service, hitherto precluded by the absence of customs and immigration facilities, few connecting possibilities, and inadequate runway length on which heavy, fuel-laden widebody aircraft could take off for intercontinental sectors. But higher-thrust engines facilitating shorter-field performance had remedied the latter problem, and pre-departure U.S. clearance could have been performed in Ireland. Because Southwest and Ryanair maintained the same business models by operating single-type, B737 fleets from underserved, overpriced, secondary airports whose lower operating costs could be channeled into lower fares, domestic-international traffic feed between the two had been feasible. Despite existing Islip service provided by Delta and US Airways Express, Southwest still carried 92% of its passengers. However, the proposed strategy never materialized.

Indeed, by the end of the year, the number of potential Southwest connecting flights only declined when decreased demand necessitated the cancellation of six daily departures, including two to Baltimore, three to Chicago, and one to Las Vegas.

Potential service loss counterbalancing occurred on May 1 of the following year, when Spirit Airlines, after an eight-year interval, reinaugurated twice daily, round-trip, Airbus A-319 service to Ft. Lauderdale, with $7.00 introductory fares, facilitating 23 Caribbean and Latin American connections through its south Florida hub. The service, reinstated because of Islip's ease of access and uncongested operating environment, was prompted by a 50% landing fee reduction during its first year of operations, and had the potential of generating $300,000 in airport revenues from parking fees, car rentals, and concessions. It became the second carrier, after Southwest, to serve Ft. Lauderdale, the latter with three daily departures.

The A-319, the airport's first regularly scheduled Airbus operation, touched down at 09:54 on Runway 6 on its inaugural flight, taxiing through a dual fire truck-created water arch, before redeparting at 10:30 as Flight 833 with a high load factor. The second flight departed in the evening.

The flights were two of Spirit's more than 200 systemwide ones to 43 destinations, but the weak flicker of light they provided was almost as quickly doused when, three months later, on July 31, rising fuel prices and declining economic conditions necessitated their discontinuation, leaving only a promise of return when improved conditions merited their reinstatement. They never did.

Further tipping the scales to the service loss side was Delta Air Lines' decision to discontinue its only remaining, single daily regional jet service operated by its Comair counterpart to Atlanta. The withdrawal severed the feed to the world's largest airport in terms of enplanements and to Delta's largest connecting hub, and ending the Long Island presence it had established as far back as 1984. Delta cited the reason for the discontinuation, along with that in other markets, as an attempt to "optimize…financial performance." Its 19 employees were laid off.

The second carrier loss, leaving only Southwest and US Airways Express, resulted in a 10.2% passenger decline in 2008 compared to the year-earlier period.

Another attempted, but mostly unsuccessful, airline service occurred in June of the following year with the appearance of PublicCharters.com, which intended to link Islip with Groton, Conn., and Nantucket, Mass., during the summer.

In order to remedy Long Island MacArthur Airport's identity recognition deficiency, a study completed by a Phil Nolan assembled task force strongly concluded that the search for and attraction of new airline service "should be a major focus of management," a function up until now mostly ignored. The airport's lack of recognition, coupled with JFK's and La Guardia's close proximity to Manhattan and their dizzying array of nonstop services underscored the need for the study.

A $150,000 federal grant, aimed at answering the elusive question of why Long Islanders still chose to use New York airports when Islip itself offered a nonstop flight, attempted to determine local resident travel patterns and then attract carrier-providing service.

A partial remedy was the implementation of a $300,000 marketing campaign, in conjunction with the Long Island Railroad and Southwest Airlines, to increase airport awareness by the eastern Nassau and Suffolk County population, featuring the slogan, "We make flying a breeze."

The FAA replaced the existing 1962 control tower in 2003 with the 157-foot cylindrical tower.

Significant attention to airport infrastructure improvement and a related masterplan was also given.

A $1.6 million sprinkler installation and asbestos removal program, subsidized by $300,000 of airport funds, was prompted by the forced August 2006 closure of the T.G.I. Friday's Restaurant located in the original, oval portion of the terminal, due to state code dictating presence in its vicinity, although its bar and take-out portion continued to operate. The Town of Islip awarded a Melville company a $75,000 contract to design the sprinkler system that September, but its installation was delayed when it was decided to include the asbestos removal in the renovation.

Outside, the long-awaited ramp repairs were also made. One year after the $12.4 million apron covering gates five through eight was laid in 2004, cracks, in which engine-ingestible debris could potentially collect, appeared, and were traceable to an inadequate, six-inch-thick subbase that failed to rise above the ground level and was therefore susceptible to frost. Water, seeping into the subbase, was subjected to freezing-thawing cycles which expanded the concrete, loosened its gravel, and propagated the cracks.

Because the concrete fronting gates three and four had been laid at the same time, they were also removed and resurfaced.

A $1.3 million Federal Aviation Administration grant equally enabled it to repave its longest runway, 6-24, during low operational times, between 23:00 and 05:00.

In order to replace the decaying, 105-foot control tower constructed in 1962, the FAA awarded J. Kokolakis Constructing, Inc., of Rocky Point, a $16.4 million contract to build a new, 157-foot, cylindrical tower next to it in January 2008, a project completed in November of the following year, at which time internal equipment, costing another $8.8 million, was installed.

Because Long Island MacArthur is an alternate to JFK and La Guardia and a Suffolk County emergency response staging area, its previous 100,000-gallon underground jet fuel tanks were replaced with more-than-triple capacity, 325,000-gallon units, after extension of a $5 million loan from Southwest Airlines, thus increasing the airport's reserve from one and a half to almost five days.

Other improvements included new runway light installations, a surveillance camera system, Wi-Fi, a revised website, and an internally reconfigured roadway.

Instrumental in the airport's modernization was the redevelopment of its 45-acre west side, which housed charter companies, flying schools, and airport maintenance in mostly dilapidated hangars and buildings, but could potentially be replaced with new energy-efficient and conservation-compliant structures optimally used by educational institutions offering air traffic control curriculums.

During the latter portion of the decade, Long Island MacArthur Airport once again rode the descending side of the revenue curve, but remained a vital air link and economic engine to eastern Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

Between 1996 and 2003, it experienced an average annual economic impact growth rate of 6.85% and between 2001 and 2007 more than 900,000 square feet of commercial space was developed along Veterans Highway, its access roadway, as a result of it. According to Hofstra University's Center for Suburban Studies, its 2003 economic impact was pegged at $202 million and was projected to increase by 68%, or to $340 million, by the end of the decade without any further expansion. The study indicated that, as a revenue generator, its potential had hardly begun to be tapped.

The service reductions, increases in Homeland Security costs, and eroding economy had all reversed that potential, but its infrastructure improvements, more than 500,000-square-foot passenger terminal, four runways, easy access, uncongested environment, two-mile proximity to the Long Island Railroad's Ronkonkoma station, and four-mile proximity to the Long Island Expressway placed it squarely on the threshold of growth in the next decade, when it was predicted that conditions would improve. According to then-newly appointed Airport Commissioner, Teresa Rizzuto, "We're ready" for new carriers at that time.

Back to the Beginning

Ready and waiting, however, may have been Long Island MacArthur's unofficial philosophy, but it still is, and, despite a considerably successful history, conditions have only propelled it back to its beginnings.

Still attempting to fulfill its original purpose, it remains caught in the vicious cycle created by airlines reluctant to provide service because of a lack of passengers and passengers reluctant to use the airport because airlines do not provide the service they seek. During the last half decade, this phenomenon has virtually choked it into nonexistence.

Although 1.8 million passengers in its eastern Nassau and Suffolk County catchment area make an average of 3.7 annual trips, these favorable facts end here, since only 25% of them use MacArthur for their travel. Increasing to 50% if only nonstop service was considered, this statistic emphasizes the benefit to carriers if they would provide it.

Indeed, during the five-year period from 2007 to 2012, the number of annual departures declined from 14,784 to 7,930, the steepest reduction of all U.S. mid-sized airfields, virtually reducing the Long Island facility to its 1999 status, the year Southwest Airlines sparked the latest development cycle.

Aside from being victim to the recession and escalating fuel costs like other airports, it has been historically forced to operate in the shadow of the two major New York airports, thus drawing upon much of the same market base, yet it relies almost exclusively on a single carrier, Southwest, for its service. The increasing trend toward airline consolidation furthermore resulted in fewer potential air service providers, almost all of which operated from the airport some time in the past, while fuel prices have rendered their code share regional jet operations unprofitable, prompting the withdrawal of the carriers that had once provided vital hub feed, such as Atlantic Southeast (ASA) to Atlanta, Comair to Cincinnati, and Continental Express to Cleveland.

Electing to deviate from the philosophy of operating from underserved, overpriced, secondary airports upon which it had been founded, and responding to passenger demand for major market presence, Southwest has progressively rebalanced aircraft assets from smaller to larger cities to maximize revenues, but has dismantled much of the Islip market it itself had cultivated in the process.

Countering this assessment, Southwest indicated that this strategy reflected systemwide industry changes and not those restricted to MacArthur.

The Long Island market involves factors beyond systemwide industry trends, however. Spurred by the additional slots it obtained at La Guardia Airport after its AirTran acquisition, Southwest itself increased frequencies and destinations from the higher-yield and load-factor field.

Having operated a peak of 34 daily departures from Long Island, it gradually reduced its presence, discontinuing service to two of its focus cities – namely, Nashville and Las Vegas – and therefore removing the flight connections they represented.

By the time its Chicago-Midway service was discontinued and shifted to La Guardia in June 2012, its number of flights had been almost halved, to 18.

While it has been credited with resurrecting the airport, it has, in many ways, now become the obstacle to its growth. Because of its dominance and low fare structure, it served as a deterrent to other airlines contemplating service there, particularly on the routes, such as those to Florida, on which it holds a monopoly. Yet, like walking a tightrope, Town of

2015 satellite view of Long Island MacArthur Airport. (Google Earth)

Islip officials have consistently made considerable efforts to maintain a close relationship with the airline, since the airport's future hinges upon it.

That future depends upon more than flight and passenger figures. It also depends upon financial ones, and these have been anything but optimistic. During the three-year period from 2010 to 2012, for example, the airport lost almost $4.2 million, forcing it to use funds collected from its $11 million sale of a land parcel to the Long Island Rail Road in 2009 to compensate for the deficit, as well as attract businesses to lease in-terminal storefronts; impose, for the first time, a general aviation landing fee; and reduce staff counts and overtime hours.

If Long Island MacArthur is to once again mature into a regional provider, reaping its own economic sustainability through landing, operational, office, concession, and parking fees, it needs a much greater injection of air service, the same dilemma it faced some four decades ago before Northeastern sparked the long series of development cycles that created its success. ✈

About the Author

With degrees, certificates and licenses in aviation, teaching, writing, foreign languages, travel and tourism, computers, transportation, and Social Work from LIU Post, Farmingdale State College, Hofstra University, Nassau Community College, Adelphi University, the Nassau Association for Continuing Community Education at Molloy College, the Institute of Certified Travel Agents, the Air Safety Institute of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, and some half-dozen major airlines, Robert G. Waldvogel has amassed three decades in the aviation industry with Capitol Air, Midway Airlines, Triangle Aviation Services, Royal Jordanian Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Sabena Belgian World Airways, Swissair and Lufthansa-German Airlines in ground operations, training and management.

He has created aviation curriculums and taught at three international carriers, as well as at Farmingdale State College, the Long Island Educational Opportunity Center, and Hofstra University.

An aviation writer for Cole Palen's Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome, he has written some 50 books, training manuals, textbooks, and courses.

Fluent in three languages, he has traveled globally and extensively, and maintains professional affiliations with the Nassau Association for Continuing Community Education, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, the Rhinebeck Aerodrome Museum, the National Air and Space Society, the Hofstra University Writers Community and, of course, the American Aviation Historical Society.