

# Airport celebrates 'amazing' year

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Chicago Rockford International Airport just finished its second-best year for passenger service.

The airport saw 215,009 passengers in 2007, a 26 percent increase over 2006. The total was second only to 1991's record of 221,006.

"Every month this year surpassed the same month in 2006," Executive Director Bob O'Brien said. "I just want to congratulate the community as a whole and our airport commissioners and other leaders right up through our everyday employees who are making this happen. This is amazing, and we have a lot to be thankful for."

The airport ended the year on a strong note: It logged 19,925 passengers in December, the second-best month of the year.

The passenger numbers were boosted by Allegiant Air's new service to Phoenix/Mesa, Ariz., which started in November, and to Fort Lauderdale, which started Dec. 14.

Since the Phoenix route started, its flights have averaged 92 percent capacity.

For the year, the most popular route was Allegiant's to Las Vegas, which had 57,540 passengers. United Airline's route to Denver had 56,070, and Allegiant's route to Orlando/Sanford, Fla., had 55,935.

The airport has changed a lot since its record year of 1991. Service then was in the form of regional jets going to Chicago, Minneapolis, Detroit, Milwaukee and Peoria.

With a full year of service to Phoenix and Fort Lauderdale next year — and the hopes of adding more routes — airport officials expect to top 300,000 passengers. That would break the airport into the top 200 in the country in terms of passenger totals.

The airport didn't reach its goal of 250,000 passengers for this year because it took most of the year before new service was added. But the airport is close to adding service to Ireland this year and is in talks with airlines about service to the East and West coasts of the U.S.

"Predicting 300,000 is like inviting myself to be wrong, but I know what this market is capable of doing," O'Brien said. "We're doing a great deal better than the average community our size."

The airport is expected to break its record for cargo operations this year. Officials expect to top 1.5 billion pounds in landed weight when the year-end numbers are released this month.