

Airport travel load stays on record pace

Sep 06, 2007 @ 09:45 PM

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Another month, another double-digit increase in passenger numbers at Chicago/Rockford International Airport.

In August, 17,132 passengers flew in and out of the airport, a 28 percent increase over last August. For the year, airport passenger traffic is up 32 percent.

With that growth on existing routes and two more destinations being added, the airport is still on pace to break its 16-year-old passenger record. The airport had 221,006 passengers in 1991 and is on pace for 240,000 this year, officials say.

That's a bit below the goal of 250,000 officials talked about in January, but they still call this a very successful year.

"I thought we'd be a little bit ahead of where we are right now at this time and place," said Executive Director Bob O'Brien. "Conversely, I'm not at all disappointed in where we are at this time and place because we are on a record-breaking pace."

Allegiant Air adds flights to Phoenix-Mesa, Ariz., on Nov. 16 and to Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Dec. 14. O'Brien said he's heard the Phoenix route is the best-selling of Allegiant's new routes so far and that the Fort Lauderdale route is meeting expectations.

Meanwhile, United Airlines' revenue guarantee ends this week, but airport officials expect the airline to continue service to Denver.

"I believe, even though they haven't make an official announcement, United is staying on their own, and I believe that will be their decision," said Mike Dunn, chairman of the Greater Rockford Airport Authority. "It's clearly now to the point where it's a viable route for them."

Preliminary numbers indicate the route made more than the \$7,000 a flight guaranteed in August, the second month in a row at that level. Planes were also at least 90 percent full on the route for the third month in a row.

The airport subsidized the route by \$2.6 million in its first year and a half, \$1 million of which came from U.S. Department of Transportation funds.

Airport officials also continue to woo other airlines, and Dunn hopes to see another one or two destinations announced this year. One project is the "Charters for Starters" program, where the airport would basically rent planes to run regularly scheduled routes for a year to prove to airlines they should do the routes themselves.

The airport could find out in the next 10 days whether it will receive a federal grant to help pay for it. Also, airport officials are trying to decide which destinations to go to — Allegiant already snatched up the Mesa route the airport was planning — and officials don't want to compete with carriers.

August is typically a slower month for the airport as families gear up for school and vacation destinations become less popular. This August is the second-lightest month for the airport this year, but its year-over-year growth was the fourth-largest.