

Rockford Register Star

5 reasons why Rockford is one of the fastest growing cargo airports in the country



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A cargo plane is pictured while landing at the Chicago Rockford International Airport on Thursday, March 3, 2022. *SUSAN MORAN/ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR*

ROCKFORD — During ceremonies last June celebrating the \$50 million expansion of the [Chicago Rockford International Airport's cargo operations](#), Mayor Tom McNamara called the Rockford airport the fastest growing air cargo hub “on the face of the planet.”

High praise indeed for an airport that continues to dominate national rankings for cargo-focused airports.

Less than 10 years ago, the Rockford airport was pulling in just shy of \$1 billion in economic impact for the region and providing 2,000 jobs.

According to a study conducted in 2020 by the Illinois Department of Transportation's Aeronautics Division, those numbers have skyrocketed \$4.7 billion in economic impact for the region and roughly 8,000 jobs.

Here are five key factors contributing to Rockford's record-breaking growth:

UPS, Amazon deliver more flights, bigger planes

Cargo operations expanded by 25% in 2021 to 3.4 billion pounds of landed weight, establishing the airport as the 17th largest in the U.S. for air cargo.

Rockford is home to the second-largest UPS hub in North America and a major base of operations for Amazon Air.

"Amazon and UPS both added flights and upgraded to larger aircraft," said Chicago Rockford International Airport deputy director of operations Zack Oakley. "Some UPS routes went from a 757, to a 767 and they also added new destinations. Amazon was flying 737's into Rockford back in 2019 and has since replaced the 737's with an all-767 fleet."

International cargo boom

Rockford serves more than 15 international airlines and those operations are increasing their use of Rockford's airport, as well.

Rockford's international cargo operations have soared from four to five flights per month in the summer of 2020 to over 100 flights a month last year.

Just last month, the Rockford airport penned a new deal with leading international cargo airline Emirates SkyCargo.

A 90,000-square-foot air cargo warehousing facility opened in June to help process import and export freight. A 100,000-square-foot cargo warehouse is slated to open next week while a construction on a third warehouse measuring 50,000-square-feet is scheduled to begin this year and open in early 2023.

AAR lands United contract

AAR Corporation's maintenance, repair and overhaul facility at the airport employs about 400 people and has a contract with United Airlines to perform airframe maintenance on United's narrow-body aircraft fleet.

"The entire 737 fleet that United flies now is being maintained at the Rockford facility," Oakley said. "It's huge in setting up the long term health and viability of that (AAR) facility and pushing it forward even further."



United Airlines planes are seen Thursday, March 3, 2022 at the AAR Corp. maintenance, repair and overhaul facility on the grounds of the Chicago Rockford International Airport. *SUSAN MORAN/ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR*

Allegiant turns a new leaf

Airport officials said the number of passengers flying out of Rockford in 2021 increased by 22% compared to the previous year.

Allegiant Air serves Rockford with nonstop flights to Las Vegas, Phoenix and five destinations in Florida including Orlando, Clearwater, Punta Gorda, Destin and Sarasota.

After struggling with logistics issues and labor strife in recent years, Allegiant has upped its game recently, according to Chicago Rockford International Airport Executive Director Mike Dunn.

"They have new airplanes and they finally got labor peace with their team," Dunn said during his State of the Airport speech Feb. 16. "When they first came to Rockford, they were servicing about 14 cities in the U.S. They're now flying to about 168 cities in the U.S., so they are a remarkably fast growing airline."

\$25 million terminal makeover

The airport's passenger terminal, which was built in the late 1980s, has undergone a \$25 million expansion and modernization.

The five-year project started in 2016 and included four phases.

"We added 30,000-square-feet to the terminal on the west side of the building," Oakley said. "That's where the new check-in counters are as well as the expanded Gate 4 area. We brought our TSA screening checkpoint, which was previously only about a lane or lane-and-a-half upstairs, down to what is currently two full operating lanes with room to expand to four lanes eventually."

Other terminal improvements include a redesigned concourse, a second baggage carousel and expanded gate areas to accommodate more passengers boarding larger planes.

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