

MidAmerica anticipates new airport record by end of year

By **RANDY PIERCE**
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If all goes as anticipated, projections for passenger usage of MidAmerica St. Louis Airport in St. Clair County, which reached an all-time record level in 2021, call for that number to be surpassed by the end of the current calendar year.

This expectation was a major aspect of encouraging information provided by MAA Director Bryan Johnson to the St. Clair County Public Building Commission at a meeting in January.

Enplanements, defined as the number of people boarding aircraft for departing Allegiant passenger flights from this location, at MidAmerica reached 159,677 for the 12-month period concluding this past Dec. 31.

That total exceeded the previous record of 152,964 set in 2019, a figure which fell during 2020, a year dominated by the coronavirus pandemic, to 108,248 before beginning a marked upward trend which is pointing toward 180,000 for 2022.

These numbers can be doubled to account for returning passengers as an indication of the amount of people flying in and out of the airport. When represented in the projection for 2022, the figures are based on an official Federal Aviation Administration "terminal area forecast," as noted in the information shared by Johnson, along with historical load factors.

The increase in 2021 passengers is 3.4 percent over 2019's previous record and 46 percent higher than what it was in 2020. The heaviest traditional month for air travel from MAA as shown in the past three years' figures and also incorporated into the 2022 prediction is July with June a close second.

Johnson's presentation further included how records were set in terms of revenue brought in at MAA from parking fees collected, fuel sold to aircraft on the premises and concessions receipts. All of these factors and many others helped contribute to a regional economic impact created by the airport of \$3.1 billion, substantially higher



The terminal at MidAmerica St. Louis airport in Mascoutah.

than less than a decade ago when it was \$2.5 billion in 2021, according to information contained in a study conducted by the Illinois Department of Transportation that was shared with county officials recently.

The contributing components of this growth in impact include not only the passenger traffic but also activity concerning the various tenant businesses and agencies using the airport property, through formalized lease/rental agreements, along with the employment generated through construction work taking place there and the auxiliary related consumer spending and jobs which result from all of this.

What many believe is something that makes those impact figures even more impressive concerns the fact that they were compiled before the current terminal expansion began and prior to the announcement by the Boeing Company that it would be constructing a new manufacturing facility which is now well under way.

Still another record was established in 2021 for MAA in terms of outside sup-

port as delineated by Johnson, including that received in grants associated with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (\$1.6 million), phase three of the terminal expansion (\$12.6 million) and the federal American Rescue Plan Act stimulus fund (\$2.3 million).

As somewhat of a caveat concerning the projected passenger amount being a record, Johnson commented, "Obviously, there are some variables whether we meet that or not. We do have a high degree of confidence that 2022 will be another banner year for enplanements."

This encouraging news is coupled with anticipated passenger capacity increases from Allegiant of 56 percent in May and 49 percent in June over what they were in 2021, prompting Johnson to say, "This is terrific news" while adding that if everything proceeds forward on this track, in May there will be two or three flights, instead of one as in previous years, from MAA to Punta Gorda Airport on the west coast of Florida in

Charlotte County, serving the Fort Myers area, those plans dependent, "on just how robust Allegiant decides to make it."

There are currently 12 non-stop flights emanating from MidAmerica, the most recent which was added last year being Charleston, S.C., and the others including Las Vegas, Phoenix/Mesa, Savannah, Ga., Myrtle Beach, S.C., and seven destinations in Florida.

"Continued growth at the airport," according to St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern, "can be attributed to the airport's affordability, convenient metro St. Louis area location, safe and secure operations, reasonably priced parking and a strong partnership with Allegiant."

"We are thrilled," Johnson commented, "to see the record passenger numbers on the heels of what has been a period of extreme challenge for the aviation industry."

He added: "The opening of terminal expansion in late 2022 will foster additional growth with new gates, added frequency and greater capacity."

Flights from St. Clair County to Mexico possible in two years

By **RANDY PIERCE**
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Continued growth and expansion at MidAmerica St. Louis Airport in St. Clair County may be moved forward to the international level with non-stop flights to three destinations in Mexico within the next couple of years.

Definitive actions leading up to this possibility are in the works and proceeding in that direction, according to what MAA Director Bryan Johnson told the St. Clair County Public Building Commission at its most recent meeting on Thursday, Jan. 20.

Allegiant, the passenger service provider for the airport, has forged a relationship with a carrier called Viva Aerobus based in Mexico and has filed an application with the United States Department of Transportation, Johnson explained, to form what is called an "airline alliance" involving the two companies.

If the USDOT authorizes the plans developed by Allegiant and Viva Aerobus, direct flights from MidAmerica to Cancun, Puerto Vallarta and Cabo San Lucas could begin in late 2023 or early 2024.

Viva Aerobus, similar to Allegiant, is described by Johnson as an ultra-low-cost passenger airline service. The agreement awaiting the federal-level approval would allow the two entities to incorporate their forces, share information and schedule flights between those Mexican resort locations and places



A rendering of the new hold room for passengers at MidAmerica St. Louis Airport. The terminal expansion project is advancing and is expected to be fully operational by the end of the 2022.

where Allegiant operates like MAA.

"Really, it's two airlines coming together as one," Johnson told the PBC members. "This would strengthen the United States and Mexican markets as an opportunity for these carriers to pick up some additional passengers through this expansion."

MidAmerica St. Louis Airport is named in the application as a departure and landing point for this service, Johnson noted, adding that this inclusion, "is good news for us."

This matter was also addressed at the December meeting of the PBC as part of

an extensive and comprehensive presentation by Jack Penning, representing a firm called Volaire Aviation Consulting which has a contractual agreement with MAA.

Penning said Viva Aerobus is the second largest low-cost carrier in Mexico and showed maps, developed as part of the agreement proposal that it has with Allegiant, which indicate routes from the latter's U.S. airports, including MAA, to the destinations in Mexico.

He further mentioned as longer-range possibilities resulting from this partnership passenger flights from MAA to Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey.

As all of this unfolds, proceeding toward becoming reality, while still tentative and pending more meetings at those corporate levels plus logistical action before reaching finalization, Penning, who used the first-person plural pronoun referring to MAA throughout his address to the PBC, said "This is going to happen. We are obviously in the first 10 markets that get service immediately and this would be massive for this airport."

"I want to underscore our future is not just domestic markets, our future is going to be international and it's going to come faster than you think."