

Cedar Rapids airport adjusts to larger planes, more passengers

'Upgauging' the result of growing demand for flights, pilot shortage



Handlers load baggage onto a United Express CRJ-200 regional jet airplane headed to Denver at The Eastern Iowa Airport in southwest Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on Thursday, April 6, 2017. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

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CEDAR RAPIDS — The airplanes at Eastern Iowa Airport are getting bigger, which could result in the need for officials to update future plans for airport expansion.

The term is “upgauging” — when airline companies swap out smaller regional jets with larger mainline aircraft.

Eastern Iowa Airport Director Marty Lenss said he’s been seeing increased upgauging because of a

“With a decreased pilot supply, the major airlines are figuring out how to serve small markets a little bit differently than they used to, and in a lot of cases that means upgauging,” Lenss said. “And almost all cases, for communities, upgauging is going to be in the foreseeable future.”

Pilot shortage

With a growing number of pilots reaching retirement age and fewer young people entering commercial aviation, the nation’s pilot deficit is projected to reach 15,000 by 2026, according to a 2015 study by University of North Dakota’s Aviation Department,

To adjust, airlines are using larger planes at regional airports in an effort to reduce the total number of flights.

Tim McClung, planning and outreach manager with the Iowa Department of Transportation’s office of aviation, said airlines operating across the state are trying to adjust.

“We have eight commercial airports in Iowa and we’re hearing concerns from all of them,” McClung said. “We’re hearing them say they have all experienced canceled flights at one time or another because pilots are unavailable.”

Larger Planes

In addition to a pilot shortage, many airlines also are upgauging as they phase out older, smaller 50- to 90-seat regional jets and swap in larger, more modern jets, McClung said.

regional jets — with 50 to 65 seats — to 110-seat Boeing 717 jets.

In June, United Airlines' flights to Denver will shift from CR2 and CR7 regional jets — 50 to 70 seats — to 128-seat Airbus A319 jets.

Lenss said bringing in larger planes does provide benefits. Mainline jets offer more seats, amenities like Wi-Fi, more first class seats and additional pricing options.

Logistical challenges

While Eastern Iowa Airport is equipped to handle large commercial jets like Boeing's 747 and 757, multiple planes of that size at one time creates logistical challenges.

Larger planes have wider wingspans, which creates space constraints on the apron.

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“The airport can certainly handle it, but that’s kind of one-off events and when we have it at a regular basis we have to look at spacing a little bit differently than we have in the past. The good news is we have the time to plan it out,” Lenss said.

four-stage update project.

Phase three is to add gate hold seating, more food and beverage amenities after screening gates and two bridges to bring the airport to a total nine bridges.

Phase four is expected to add more gate hold seating options, but could add even more gates if upgauging continues, Lenss said.

“We’re playing a little bit of catch up now to the aircraft equipment changes that are coming at us faster than our project is coming online,” Lenss said. “There’s potential that we may even be adding more gates in project four, where two years ago we weren’t looking to add gates.”

Lenss said airport parking also could be reaching its limit for surface lot size, which means future additions might require building parking ramps.

Phase four planning won’t begin for about 18 months.

The DOT’s McClung said Des Moines International Airport, the state’s largest, is dealing with similar issues.

“We’re hearing the same thing out of Des Moines, as upgauging continues to happen, they’re struggling with the layout of their gates and terminal design,” McClung said.

Flight projections

Lenns said upgauging correlates with growing ridership.

a 9 percent increase in seats filled so far this year compared to the same time span in 2016.

Total passenger volume at the airport is up 16 percent so far this year.

Just last year the airport saw more than 1 million passengers, marking the seventh time surpassing such a threshold.

The airport saw record passenger numbers in October and November last year, as well as January and February this year.

“We’re optimistic that we’re going to have a pretty strong 2017,” he said. “These are quite honestly great growing pains.”

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