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McCarran International fifth-busiest U.S. airport in '05

By [CHRIS JONES](#)
[GAMING WIRE](#)

Las Vegas' McCarran International climbed one spot to become the nation's fifth-busiest passenger airport last year on the Airports Council International-North America's annual traffic ranking.

Southern Nevada's primary air gateway soared past Denver International, which ranked fifth in 2004.

McCarran also bested busy big-city airports including Phoenix's Sky Harbor, New York's Kennedy, Houston's Bush Intercontinental and San Francisco International, the council said Wednesday.

The Washington, D.C.-based trade group credited McCarran with 44,280,190 passengers, or approximately 13,000 more than the Clark County Aviation Department reported in its 2005 year-end report.

A McCarran spokeswoman said Wednesday that the variation resulted from the airport's ability to obtain updated statistics from airlines. The discrepancy was not large enough to affect the 2005 rankings.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International, the largest hub for Delta Air Lines and a key gateway to Europe and South America, topped last year's list with 85.9 million passengers.

Chicago's O'Hare International, United Airlines' largest hub, ranked second with nearly 76.8 million.

Los Angeles International, which connects the United States with destinations throughout the Pacific Rim, finished third with 61.5 million passengers.

American Airlines' Dallas/Fort Worth stronghold, which handled slightly more than 59 million travelers, ranked fourth.

As recently as 2001, McCarran handled just 35.2 million passengers, good enough for seventh place on a list that ranked Atlanta No. 1 with more than 75.8 million passengers that year.

But recent growth in U.S. and international air travel, coupled with Las Vegas' burgeoning leisure and trade show industries, raised demand for flights here. Likewise, new security checkpoints, gates and other capital improvements enabled more travelers to fly through McCarran.

More growth should follow. Clark County has committed to spend \$2.4 billion to expand and improve McCarran over the next five years, thereby raising its capacity to roughly 53 million passengers a year.

Space constraints within terminals and on runways -- as well as McCarran's business model, which favors travelers headed to or from Las Vegas rather than those simply passing through -- make it unlikely Las Vegas will ever crack the nation's top four.

Las Vegas' largest carrier, Dallas-based Southwest Airlines, thrives on point-to-point service rather than hubs.

Second-place US Airways, formerly America West, offers a mix of point-to-point and hubbing, while several smaller airlines, particularly Allegiant Air, have gained market share offering leisure travelers direct service between Las Vegas and their hometowns.

Southern Nevada's sparse population and limited economic base also hurt McCarran's ability to surpass those in larger metropolitan regions like Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles or the Dallas Metroplex.

Clark County Aviation Director Randall Walker downplayed McCarran's new ranking, adding he doesn't want the airport to handle more passengers unless their presence would benefit the city's travel industry.

"We're not really fixated on these numbers like some other communities," said Walker, who fielded calls from Denver after McCarran moved ahead of that city's airport in a recent quarterly ranking.

2005'S BUSIEST U.S. AIRPORTS

Rank	Airport	Passengers
1.	Hartsfield-Jackson (Atlanta)	85.9 million
2.	O'Hare (Chicago)	76.8 million
3.	Los Angeles International	61.5 million
4.	Dallas/Fort Worth	59.0 million
5.	McCarran (Las Vegas)	44.3 million
6.	Denver International	43.3 million
7.	Sky Harbor (Phoenix)	41.2 million
8.	Kennedy (New York)	40.6 million
9.	Bush Intercontinental (Houston)	39.7 million
10.	Minneapolis/St. Paul	37.6 million

Source: Airports Council International-North America

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