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LAS VEGAS VISITORS: McCarran tally: 44.3 million

Always-busy Las Vegas airport sets passenger record for second consecutive year

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For the second consecutive year, McCarran International Airport posted an annual record, this time with nearly 44.3 million arriving and departing passengers.

That's up 6.8 percent from 2004, and 22 percent better than the nearly 36.3 million travelers reported just two years ago.

McCarran also handled record numbers of taxi pickups and parked vehicles last year, further evidence of rising congestion within Southern Nevada's most-vital transportation artery, the head of the Clark County Aviation Department said Thursday.

"It's a good problem," Aviation Director Randall Walker said of the rising traffic. "Whenever my staff fusses about growth challenges, I'll remind them that we could have been like some other airports after 9/11 where they laid people off and cut budgets by \$100 million."

Despite the benefits that come with ferrying more money-spending tourists and trade show delegates to a city that depends on travel to fuel its economy, McCarran's skyrocketing growth creates significant concerns.

More than \$2.4 billion in airport capital improvements are planned or under way. But Walker admits physical changes alone can't offset future growth until a second international airport can open 11 or more years from now in nearby Ivanpah Valley.

"We're designing and building (McCarran) as fast as we can," Walker said. "Our only concern is that the growth is going to (outpace) our ability to get these facilities implemented. That creates the challenge of having to put more people in a facility than it's designed for."

A decade or so ago, McCarran routinely had daily slowdowns from midnight to 6 a.m., as well as during certain midday periods. That late-night lull is now down to four hours, and daytime slowdowns no longer exist.

The lack of downtime makes it difficult to close parts of McCarran for repairs or maintenance, a

problem that's compounded by higher-than-normal passenger levels.

"How do you close a restroom down when there are dozens and dozens of people who need to use a restroom at the moment?" Walker said. "We don't have any lull periods anymore. We just have peaks and then we have bigger peaks."

Help should arrive later this year, beginning with April's planned introduction of the main terminal's second in-line baggage screening node.

Two more nodes will open by the end of the year, freeing up much-needed space within ticketing areas that now house several truck-size explosive detection machines.

Walker hopes to this spring introduce off-site baggage check-in at The Venetian, the first of several Strip hotels earmarked for the service.

In addition to allowing users to bypass airport ticketing counters, the service would reduce taxi drop-off times by eliminating the need to unload baggage from a cab's trunk outside the airport.

McCarran leaders hope 10 percent of all local air travelers will eventually use off-site check-in.

The airport has also become more creative with its gates, including next month's move of several late-night US Airways flights to the C concourse, an area long dominated by Southwest Airlines.

Since Southwest operates few late-night flights through Las Vegas, the move is a natural one, Walker said.

Higher passenger counts were a boon for local taxi drivers. McCarran set a record with nearly 3.16 million taxi pickups last year, up 10 percent from 2004 and 26.5 percent above 2003.

The airport averaged 8,645 taxi pickups per day in 2005, approximately 1,800 more than its average two years prior.

The presence of so many taxis and limousines heightens the need for off-site baggage check-in, and the consolidated car rental center that will open later this year.

The \$135 million rental car center, under construction south side of the Las Vegas Beltway near Warm Springs Road and Giles pie Street, will ease congestion in several areas.

Common shuttles will replace the numerous busses operated by companies such as Avis or Hertz, thereby freeing curb space outside the airport.

Car rental counters near baggage claim will be removed to make room for larger baggage carousels, likely in 2007.

The car rental center's opening will also create parking areas northeast of Terminal 2 once the existing car rental centers are razed.

"All of these things have little benefits toward our ability to expand and put more people through the facility," Walker said.

McCarran's parking garages reported 577,773 vehicle exits last year, up 3.4 percent.

Garages were full 75 days in 2005, down from 96 the prior year, as more drivers took advantage of expanded hours at an uncovered economy lot along Russell Road.

Revenue at the economy lot was \$3.3 million last year, up from \$1.6 million in 2004, when it was used primarily for overflow traffic during peak periods such as Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Overall, airport parking revenue was approximately \$25.6 million, up 20 percent.

The added revenue was partially generated by a new fee structure: long-term parking garage rates rose from \$10 to \$12 per day on March 29, the same day economy lot fees were dipped from \$8 to \$6 per day.

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