

How the new president can fulfill his pledge to improve airports

Upgrade terminals, yes, but fix the capacity problem, too

Joe Sitt, Op-Ed at Crain's NY Business | NOV 20, 2016



A plane sits on the tarmac at New York's LaGuardia airport. (Photo: Bloomberg News)

Even during a divisive campaign, Donald Trump kept saying something that was music to my ears: We must fix our airports. Singling out LaGuardia, Kennedy and Newark airports, he lamented at the first debate, “Our airports are like from a Third World country. ... You come in from Dubai and Qatar ... you come in from China, you see these incredible airports.”

Trump’s win is an endorsement of the long-held agenda of the Global Gateway Alliance, the organization I founded and chair, to improve the region’s airports. The president-elect ran on the platform of boosting investment and modernizing the nation’s transportation hubs, rightly singling out New York’s deteriorating airport terminals and physical infrastructure. Indeed, his promise to spend \$1 trillion¹ over the next decade on infrastructure through public-private

¹ **aiR footnote:** This \$1 trillion figure is about **ALL** infrastructure, with little reference to airports and aviation, and it frankly has nothing to do with infrastructure capacity. In context, Trump is doing as all politicians do: gaining votes by promising jobs. Also, it is notable that aviation has a very rich revenue base, in the tens of billions in taxes/fees collected (with the majority paid on each leg flown by each airline passenger); indeed, this slush fund is so deep, DoT and FAA are pushing construction of unneeded runways at the most remote locations (see for example the story of the new crosswind runway at Mora, MN, built in a wetland used by migratory waterfowl!).

partnerships and private investments from tax incentives would go a long way to bringing the nation's airports into the 21st century.²

However, with critical terminal-modernization projects already underway in New York, we must also fix the capacity problem. More than \$6 billion has been invested in new terminals at LaGuardia, JFK and Newark, and the [plan to modernize LaGuardia](#) will add \$8 billion more, but without expanding our runways and modernizing air-traffic control,³ these dollars will go to waste and the chronic delays costing a fortune in lost time and productivity will continue.

Elsewhere, our rivals are not resting. After many years of debate, the British government is taking steps to increase its airport capacity by lending support for a third runway at Heathrow. British officials know they must invest in infrastructure to maintain their nation's global standing as a major airport player. The decision comes a year after Heathrow dropped in the international rankings for passenger traffic to sixth from third.⁴

New York, meanwhile, has the most congested airspace in the world, making arrivals and departures more challenging to orchestrate and giving rise to roughly a third of all delays in the U.S. The physical constraints of our runways intensify the problem.⁵ A recent Global Gateway Alliance study ranked the three New York-area airports in the nation's bottom five for delays this year, with LaGuardia dead last.

The stakes are high. Our airports are economic engines for the region, generating approximately \$116 billion in annual economic activity and accounting for more than 590,000 jobs. And yet flight delays caused by congestion at the three airports are projected to cause \$79 billion in losses to the regional economy by 2025 and 39 million unserved passengers, according to the Partnership for New York City (P4NYC).⁶

² aiR footnote: Much has been written about the waste and cronyism behind public-private partnerships. Likewise, it is worth noting that 'private investments from tax incentives' are essentially a cost-shift; i.e., the 'tax incentive typically translates to "*company, you do not have to pay this tax (that's the incentive), so we'll instead collect it from everyone else (regular people).*"

³ aiR footnote: The delays at these three airports (KEWR, KJFK, and KLGA) will not be resolved by so-called 'modernizing ATC'. If Sitt, PANYNJ, FAA and others **REALLY** wanted to resolve delay problems, they would demand FAA impose strict (and much lower) limits on operations per hour. To support this, they would suggest that FAA should impose a heavy carbon tax on aviation fuel, FAA should set passenger taxes in direct proportion to total itinerary miles flown, and FAA should impose a sliding scale where airlines pay a fee for each departure with subsequent departures within each hour charged at double or triple the basic fee (this would disincentivize hubbing).

⁴ aiR footnote: The problem at Heathrow is that the airport is the top hub for through-passengers between North America and Europe. This third runway does not serve the local residents as much as it serves the airlines seeking to ratchet up profits at Heathrow, with the massive through-passenger processing done under the hub concept. A third Heathrow runway will ratchet the local economy minimally upward, but will maximally diminish health (stress, sleep loss, air pollutants), as well as quality of life (in terms of noise, congestion, feeling disempowered, and reduced air quality) for hundreds of thousands of residents. The exact same scenario is happening in the NYC area: FAA is aiding profit-seeking airlines to abandon all environmental regulation (i.e., decades-old noise abatement procedures) to increase 'hub throughput' and thus slightly increase corporate profits.

⁵ aiR footnote: No, what REALLY intensifies the problem of delays cascading out of the NYC airports is that FAA and the airlines are simply scheduling too many flights into too little time each day. The current scheduled traffic levels, all aimed at aiding airline profits via hubbing (accommodating through-passengers who never even leave the airport!) guarantees delays every day. Failing to address this will cause the problem to only worsen.

⁶ aiR footnote: This study is not only an extremely biased joke, it also contains substantially false data. A table within cites FAA as the source for figures showing annual growth in airport operations at the three main NYC airports. The data is false; the real data, available online at FAA's ATADS-OPSNET, proves the P4NYC report

The first step to [expand capacity](#) is getting the federal government to fully roll out NextGen, a satellite-based air-traffic control technology, in the New York airspace to replace our 1940s-era radar.⁷

We also desperately need new runways. Runway projects face community opposition and numerous regulatory hurdles, but they are essential.

The Regional Plan Association set forth several runway configurations for JFK and Newark that we should think seriously about. They include expanding runway access into Jamaica Bay at JFK and building a third western runway parallel to the existing two at Newark. In addition, ReThink Studio's "[ReThinkLGA](#)" proposal would expand LaGuardia onto Rikers Island, giving the airport access to two runways over 10,000 feet long.

The path forward may not be smooth, but it is clear. The capacity problem is the No. 1 issue facing New York airports and will only worsen the longer we wait to install modern airspace technology and better runways. As Trump looks to implement his ambitious infrastructure plan, it's time to take a page out of London's book and modernize our airports' infrastructure both on the ground and in the air.

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grossly exaggerated annual operations. According to the P4NYC report, which was done in February 2009, annual totals peaked in 2007 at 1.45 million operations; but, ATADS shows the true figure was 1.30 million. Furthermore, FAA's ATADS shows this count declining, with the latest figure (1.23 million, in 2015) down 5% from the peak in 2007.

⁷ **aiR footnote:** this line gets the 'BullSitt Award'. Here, Sitt is citing the same-old false argument, that today's controllers are burdened with equipment from the 1940's. This is incredible disinformation. The fact is, the radar system has advanced through a series of improvements, in basic technology (vacuum tubes to transistors to integrated circuits to microprocessors and massive data storage/manipulation capacities), in regulations imposed by FAA (requiring transponders, defining airspace boundaries, requiring sophisticated avionics systems for collision avoidance and navigation, etc.), and in FAA's development of GPS routes (**WAY BACK IN THE MID-1990's!**).