



Joseph Lopano

EDITORS' NOTE Joe Lopano was appointed to his current post in 2011. He has worked for 37 years in the aviation industry. Prior to this, he worked at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport for 14 years as its Executive Vice President for Marketing and Terminal Management. His experience also encompasses 19 years in the airline industry, including serving in leadership positions at Continental Airlines. He received a bachelor's in finance and accounting from Pace University.

AIRPORT BRIEF Tampa International Airport (tampairport.com), one of America's favorite airports, strives consistently toward five strategic objectives: customer service excellence; safety and security; growth and financial strength; employee and community engagement; and innovation and process improvement.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Tampa International Airport?

I felt like it was an airport that had a tremendous amount of upside based on its performance until that time. It has always had very high levels of customer service, but it has been underserved in terms of international flights.

I recognized that I had expertise in this area and this airport was small enough that I could come in and do a lot of things in a short period of time. It was important to me to know that I could make changes that were significant.

We're expanding the airport with a big project, we have added a lot of international flights and we have done what we said we would do.

How important was it to communicate your vision internally as you came into this role?

I had two issues: I had to convince my external audience that what I was talking about was feasible, and then convince my internal audience that our plan forward was feasible, because it was quite different from what had been done in the past.

It was important to get some early positive wins so people could see this would work, so we quickly established an international strategic plan and an incentive program. Then

Increasing International Travel to Tampa

An Interview with Joseph Lopano, Chief Executive Officer, Tampa International Airport

we got our first win, which was a nonstop flight to Zurich.

At that point, people began to realize this was a good plan. Once our internal audience saw that we were increasing internal revenues and that I was going to restore pay raises because we were making profits, that went a long way toward gaining credibility.

Will you touch on the three-phase expansion you have in place?

The first phase, which is almost complete, is a \$1-billion project and it's called Decongestion. The ultimate goal is to add gates and build a new airside to accommodate more flights, but we can't do that if our roadways and curbsides are congested.

The first step was to decongest the main terminal area. We moved the rental car operation away from the building and to the south of the airport property. This has allowed us to decongest the roadways.

The second step is to enable the growth of the gates, which will come in the third step. In this step, we're adding additional curbsides, moving our headquarters, and getting into real estate development, which will enable future growth at the curbs.

The final stage is to add gates. That will come within 10 years. Now that we have ample curbside and roadway capacity, we've expanded our main terminal by 50,000 feet so we can now pump another 10 or 15 million people through our buildings and roadways.

What efforts have you made to increase and strengthen the airport's cargo operation?

Previously, there had not been much cargo growth, but we were fortunate to have Amazon make a major investment in distribution centers near the airport. A knockoff benefit of that is that Amazon is now going into the air freight business, so they're now serving Tampa International with three 767 wide-body freighters every day. That has driven the cargo number up about 50 percent.

In addition to that, UPS decided to move their operation from an airport across the bay to our airport because we have the facilities for them to grow.

We expect this to be a growth area for us and we're doing everything we can to help with that.

Are there specific markets you're most focused on when it comes to who Tampa should be servicing?

We create an international strategic plan every five years. The original plan told us we could support service to Panama, so we targeted that destination and Copa Airlines. We now have daily nonstop service to Panama on Copa.

We also targeted Frankfurt and we now have nonstop service there via Lufthansa.

What's so important about international flights is they're very valuable in terms of the local economic impact. The estimate is that a wide-body aircraft from Europe on a daily basis would generate \$150 million per year in economic benefit. The money that comes in with European tourists stays in our community, so it's important for us to continue our international efforts.

We now have a new strategic plan that tells us that in Europe, we should target Manchester, Amsterdam and Dublin. Our Latin American targets are Mexico City, Lima and Bogotá.

Is the impact that the airport has on the Tampa community well understood?

The first thing I did in Tampa was commission a study that would show us the economic benefit if we had success in attracting these flights. Once we provided that, the board and the public were happy to endorse the efforts we put into this.

Our community now understands it well because we have been singing that song for seven years, and most businesspeople understand the value of tourism, especially in Florida. It's important for airports around the country to make sure their communities understand exactly how much economic power is being generated by that institution and make sure they understand that this requires a highly-qualified staff and great marketing work.

How concerned are you that much of America's infrastructure needs significant upgrading today?

It's one of the most important things that we as a country have to deal with. Aviation is the most critical infrastructure we have, and we haven't reinvested in the airport infrastructure in years. We believe it's important to update the passenger facility charge, which is a federally regulated charge that is placed on every airline ticket. The money that is collected gets remitted to the airport to use for certain federally approved projects, like new terminals.

That charge hasn't changed since 2000, so it's worth far less than what it was intended to be worth. We continue to lobby to have the federal government update that charge to reflect the spending power of today. There are millions of jobs that could be created if that was modernized. ●