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# Overhauling La Guardia, an Airport With a Historical Name but a Tarnished Image

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP    JULY 29, 2015

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has declared that the \$4 billion rebuilding planned at La Guardia Airport in Queens will amount to replacing the airport “in its entirety.”

So is it time, after 76 years, to replace the name, too?

Patrick J. Foye, the executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which runs New York City’s airports, said this week that there were no plans to do so.

But in the era of brand consciousness and corporate sponsorship, when stadiums and arenas change names as often as people change socks, it is worth asking whether the La Guardia brand has outlived its usefulness. If an entirely new airport emerges in the coming years, will its 1939 name even be relevant?

No matter the historical value of La Guardia, it is a sullied brand. As a video promulgated by the governor’s office would have it, La Guardia has become synonymous with “dirty,” “cramped,” “hot” and “delayed.”

Once known as a convenient gateway for short-haul domestic flights, La Guardia is now famous for having been likened by Vice President Joseph R. Biden to a “third world” airport.

Yet, as legacy brands go, La Guardia is quite powerful. Few public works projects of the 20th century are as appropriately and deservedly identified with a politician as La Guardia Airport is with Fiorello H. La Guardia (1882-1947), the mayor who fought relentlessly to create it. You did not want to get in his way as he did so.

Though the project was known throughout development and construction as the New York Municipal Airport at North Beach — or simply North Beach Airport — it was renamed for Mayor La Guardia even before it opened, while he was still alive and in office. (Would you call that a prehumous honor?)

On Nov. 2, 1939, the Board of Estimate — a kind of upper legislative chamber back in the day — voted 12 to 1 to name it the Municipal Airport (La Guardia Field). Only the Queens borough president, George U. Harvey, objected.

“It was very generous of them, and very thoughtful,” the mayor responded. “I will think it over.” Having thought it over, he evidently liked the idea. A lawsuit seeking to enjoin the name, on the ground that only the City Council could bestow such an honor, fizzled out.

So it was, exactly one month later, that Mayor La Guardia personally welcomed the first flight into La Guardia Field, operated by Transcontinental and Western Air, from Chicago. And the next flight, too, from Fort Worth, on American.

In 1947, after La Guardia Field was taken over from the city by the Port of New York Authority, it was renamed La Guardia Airport.

I asked an expert about the wisdom of rebranding. “You want to make sure you’re not throwing out a positive legacy,” said Enshalla Anderson, the executive director for consumer products at FutureBrand, a brand consultancy and a unit of the Interpublic Group. “La Guardia was known for being a visionary.”

“I don’t know that the name has to be the symbol of change,” she added, “because there will be so many other symbols.”

In bold strokes, the plan outlined by Governor Cuomo would consolidate three outmoded terminals in a single structure, built closer to the Grand Central Parkway to create aircraft taxiways. It could be reached by light rail and ferry.

Ms. Anderson said, “What we would consider is, does the name have the elasticity to manage the transformation that we’re talking about?”

Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University who first flew out of La Guardia on Mohawk Airlines in 1955, believes it does.

“We’re finally going to have an airport equal to the mayor’s name,” he said.

That brings us to the other Queens airport, renamed in honor of President John F. Kennedy in December 1963, less than a month after he was assassinated.

Renamed from what?

Not Idlewild Airport; not officially, though that is what everyone called it.

And not New York International, either, though that was part of the official name.

No, it was New York International Airport-Anderson Field, named for Maj. Gen. Alexander E. Anderson, a veteran of the “Fighting Irish” regiment in World War I and a former chairman of the Queens County Democratic Committee.

General Anderson died in 1942 while commanding the 86th Infantry Division at Camp Howze in Texas. Six months later, the Council renamed the newest airport in his honor. It held its ground over a veto by the mayor, concerned that any renamings might be premature while World War II was still being fought.

The mayor was Fiorello H. La Guardia.

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