

LIFE | TRAVEL | THE MIDDLE SEAT

LaGuardia: The Worst Busy Airport in the World?

It moves 27 million people a year with two runways



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A welcome sign is partially lit above the ground transportation exit at LaGuardia's Terminal B. *LEAH*



By

SCOTT MCCARTNEY

March 30, 2016

The floors, cracked and yellowed, are often the best and only seating. The lights are dim, the low ceiling is stained, the lines at the tiny bathrooms are routinely long. Even the owner describes the Central Terminal Building and the passenger experience there as “dreadful.”

New York’s LaGuardia Airport may not be the worst airport in the world, but it is certainly the worst busy airport. It has been patched and parts have been renovated, but

the Central Terminal Building is much the same layout and dimensions as when it opened in 1964. Its two relatively short and intersecting runways and parking-garage-tight taxiways propagate airline delays across the country.

“Even though they sweep it up, it doesn’t look clean. It’s old and dismal,” says Asa Beck, chief financial officer of an agricultural supply company who was recently waiting for a Southwest flight home to Denver. “The Denver airport is like a Hyatt and this is a one-star Holiday Inn.”

Last week, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey approved a \$4 billion public-private partnership plan to tear down the whole semicircle Central Terminal, which handles about half the airport’s passengers, and mate a new one with Delta’s existing two terminals, which will also be rebuilt. The plan is to move roads, tear down parking garages and rebuild them out of the way. It will also relocate airlines in phases. Construction is scheduled to start in June. Five years from now, LaGuardia will be one large hockey-stick shaped modern terminal.

It is a giant, historic effort to rebuild one of the nation’s most important airports. The terminal will move 600 feet closer to the nearby highway, Grand Central Parkway, allowing for expanded space. Gates will sit on islands connected to the main terminal by walkways elevated over new taxiways, giving planes more room to maneuver and likely reducing delays. A people mover will shuttle passengers through the terminal and on to rail connections. High-speed ferry service is planned from Manhattan.

By some measures, LaGuardia today is shockingly efficient—it moves 27 million people a year with just 680 acres of real estate, notes New York University urban planning professor Mitchell Moss. It is just 8 miles from Manhattan and close to key suburbs in New York and Connecticut. Few other cities have an airport as busy and as close as LaGuardia, says Dr. Moss.

“It is a vital part of the national economy because of the way it gives access to Manhattan and adjacent suburbs,” Dr. Moss says.

By other measures, LaGuardia is inefficient. With no good mass transit service to the airport, taxis and cars fight traffic gridlock and passengers have to plan for delays on the roads, at cramped security checkpoints, and then with flights.

LaGuardia was worst in the country in flight delays in 2015, and even though airlines build delay time into schedules, it was the only U.S. airport that couldn’t get at least three quarters of its flights to the gate within 15 minutes of their scheduled arrival time, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. It lacks food concessions, airport clubs, bathrooms, seats and power outlets for passengers. At United’s gates, the only hot

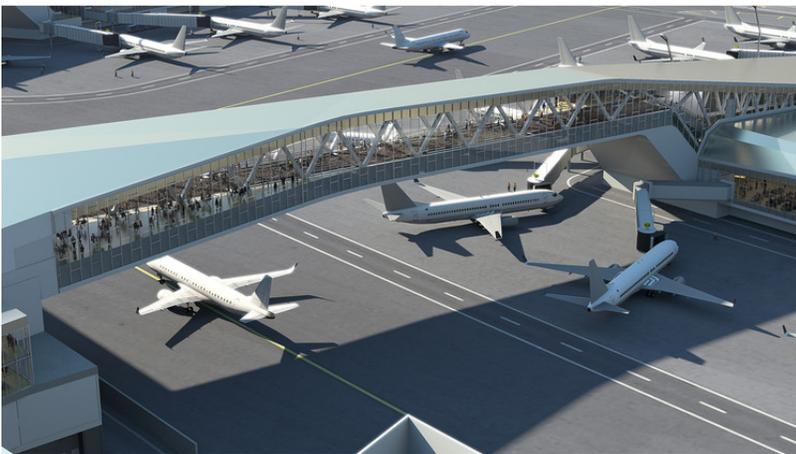


Renderings of plans for a renovated LaGuardia Airport. In five years it is expected to look like a hockey-stick shaped terminal. PHOTO: PORT AUTHORITY OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY

food you can get is a pretzel. At times, airlines have had buckets on the floor collecting water from the ceiling.

Port Authority executive director Patrick Foye describes the current condition of the Central Terminal Building as “dreadful” for passengers. The agency that owns and operates all three major New York area airports just didn’t address problems—until now, he says.

“There was plan upon plan upon plan for literally decades,” Mr. Foye says.



Renderings of plans for a renovated LaGuardia Airport. PHOTO: PORT AUTHORITY OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY

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called La Guardia a “Third World airport.” That harsh assessment gave a political push to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s efforts to rebuild the airport. The governor assembled a task force that drafted recommendations and proposed an unusual public-

private partnership that will handle design, construction and financing and operation of the new terminal.

Depending on definitions of Third World, Mr. Biden's assessment seems unfair to airports in developing countries, many of which have modernized. The closest airport to LaGuardia's size in Latin America, for example, is El Dorado Airport in Bogotá, Colombia, which handles slightly more passengers a year than LaGuardia and, like LaGuardia, has only two runways.

Bogota's 1950s facilities have already been rebuilt, with new concourses opening in 2012 and in 2013 using private financing from foreign investors.

Even though LaGuardia's rebuilding will double their costs, airlines have been clamoring for it. So has a group of New York business and civic leaders called Global Gateway Alliance. Joe Sitt, founder and chairman and a real-estate developer, says the Port Authority's approval last week was a huge step, but he's still skeptical it can pull off the task.



Travelers use newly installed iPads to surf the web in the Delta Air Lines Terminal D at LaGuardia Airport. PHOTO: VICTOR J. BLUE/BLOOMBERG

Mr. Foye said turning over the project to a private consortium will shift the risk of delays and cost overruns to private companies. "It's a very complicated construction project," he says.

Airlines say they have done all the painting and patching they can. Security checkpoints are crammed into each narrow concourse and don't have enough room to handle the passenger load, so long lines are common. Space management is creative: the TSA checkpoint at Concourse A has two lines from opposite directions against a wall, like pages of a book opening, to minimize blockage of the hallway.

Concession stands sit in main walkways. Concourses have no escalators down to baggage claim for arriving passengers—they either find an elevator or tote their carry-on bags down stairs.

In Concourse B, home to Southwest, Spirit and JetBlue, there are deep cracks in the floor, the slats in the ceiling are catawampus in many places. Some fluorescent lights are dim, some flicker and others are burned out. Southwest has gate desks in the walkway because there is not room at the two gates on the end of the concourse. Stools and seats ring the room, but they total only 60. At times there may be close to 300 people waiting for flights, with dozens on the floor.

When a flight arrives, lines form at the women's restroom. One of the two restrooms in the concourse is a one-seater; Southwest has employees standing by to redirect people to the other restroom.

The efforts of airlines are apparent: American's nine gates at Concourse D are the best of the bunch in the Central Terminal. The airline has put in a newer floor and ceiling, laid carpet in gate area and installed brighter fluorescent lighting. The concourse has more seating and concessions than others, but still its small footprint and large crowds make it feel like an ant farm.

Delta says it has spent \$200 million since 2012 on its facilities in Terminals C and D, which top anything in the Central Terminal, and some projects are still ongoing. The airline says it is firmly committed to redeveloping its space and incorporating it into the one main terminal, and is working on plans for cost, schedule and financing, a spokeswoman says.

Before it gets better, LaGuardia is likely to get even worse with construction disruption. Steve Sigmund, executive director of the Global Gateway Alliance, notes that the building is in such poor condition that added strain of pushing more people through even smaller spaces while other areas are closed off will make the LaGuardia rebuilding far more painful for travelers than other airport projects.

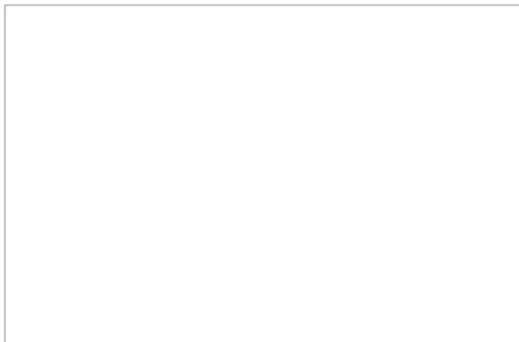
“They are going to have to work very hard to mitigate that disruption,” Mr. Sigmund says. “Until the bulldozer meets the wall you really don't know how it's going to play out.”

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Corrections & Amplifications

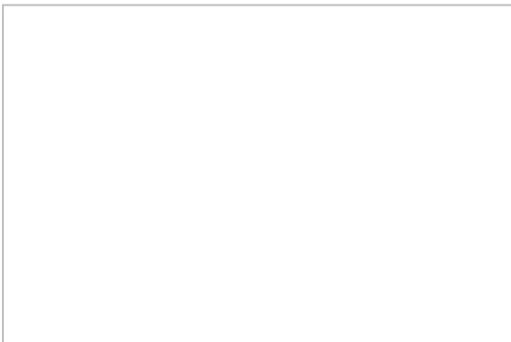
The country of Colombia was misspelled as Columbia in a previous version of this story. (April 1, 2016)

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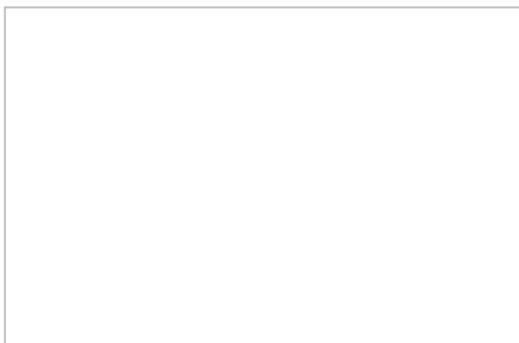
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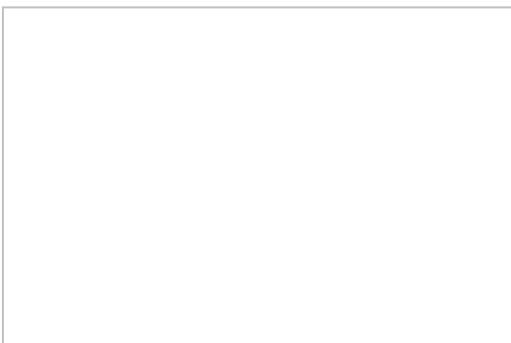
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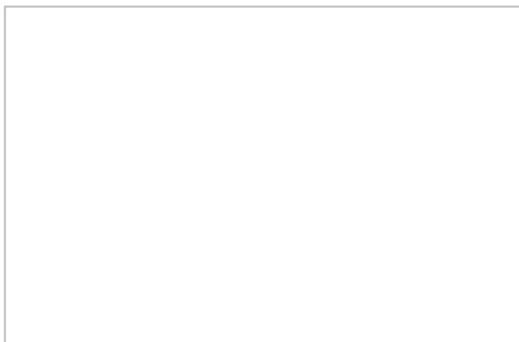
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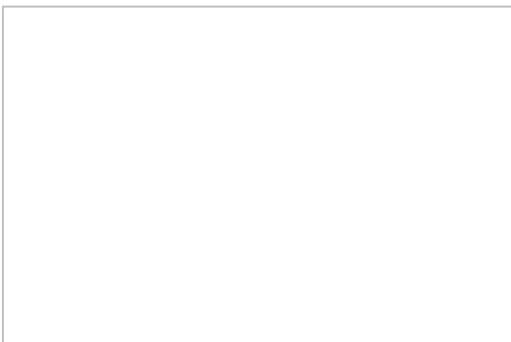
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