

Special Report: North Florida Regional Airport Growing, Diversifying

May 13, 2016
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Frontier Airlines recently restarted service at North Florida Regional Airport.

The North Florida Regional Airport in St. Augustine is having a moment.

The small airport restarted service with Frontier Airlines about three weeks ago, opened a \$4.5 million permanent terminal and is now exploring a new master plan that includes a designated logistics facility.

It's all part of what the airport sees as its duty to be a little different than what's already available in North and Central Florida.

“We explore and try to exploit niche opportunities,” said Ed Wuellner, executive director for the airport.

The airport doesn't court the main air carriers, like those available in Jacksonville and Orlando. Rather, it looks at leisure carriers like Frontier, which flies to Philadelphia and Chicago. (Wuellner added that NFRA actively competed to get Allegiant Air, which ultimately went to Jacksonville International Airport.)

One of the ways the airport is trying to improve the customer experience and accommodate the new flights is by building a terminal, which is open but will have construction through the end of summer.

Wuellner said the new permanent structure is replacing what was a fabric structure. It has a designated bag area and a covered walkway.

“Operationally, this functions a lot better for us,” Wuellner said of the project, which is 40 percent bigger than the old facility. The airport interacts with airlines differently than how it's done elsewhere: NFRA staff, rather than carrier staff, handle things like ticketing and loading of planes as a way to incentivize carriers to fly there. The airport gets its funding from parking fees, rental car commission and its general aviation segment.

“We haven’t tried to be opulent,” Wuellner said. “We realized a while back that from our perspective, the airport is not a destination. It’s simply an access point to the community.”

One of the biggest developments NFRA is working on is its 20-year master plan, with a shorter-term, five-year workplan. In the work plan is the potential for an inland logistics port, which would provide about 1,200 acres for warehousing and distribution in St. Johns County. So far, however, a timeline is not known.

The inland logistics port would work well with the railroad connections in the area, especially Florida East Coast Railroad, which has limited logistics abilities at its Bowden yard in South Jacksonville, Wuellner said.

“The physical limitations of Bowden doesn’t let them deal with trains that are as long as they’d like,” he said, adding that there would be room at the St. Johns yard. Wuellner said the inland logistics port could also have large bulk refrigerated storage for clients and room to break down containerized freight and move it north to Talleyrand Marine Terminal.