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New York Fliers May Get Choice a Bit Farther Out

By PATRICK McGEEHAN

Correction Appended

Worried about a looming traffic jam in the skies over New York City, aviation officials have begun studying ways that other airports — some more than 60 miles from Midtown Manhattan — could help relieve the congestion.

Executives of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates the three airports — La Guardia, Kennedy International and Newark Liberty International — say they fear that the increasingly crowded airspace could crimp the region's economy, driving some business travelers and tourists to other cities. They are mulling a range of incremental improvements that would allow them to squeeze more planes and passengers through the airports they have.

But the Port Authority's chairman, Anthony R. Coscia, said he believed a bolder, more controversial solution would be necessary. The time has come, Mr. Coscia said, to start creating another major airport to serve the metropolitan area.

"I think we have to start now planning the development of a potential fourth airport," Mr. Coscia said in a recent interview. "We don't want to solve our aviation problem by slowing down our economy."

A proposal for a fourth airport is not an original idea, just one that few public officials have dared broach for about 30 years. But in spite of the concept's checkered past and the Port Authority's history of overestimating growth in air traffic, the need for a fourth airport is inescapable this time, Mr. Coscia said.

The three airports are already so plagued by delays that they rank at the bottom of the list of big American airports for on-time performance. And, with passenger counts rising steadily, officials predict that the three big airports will reach the limit of their capacity in just 15 years.

This year, after resuming growth that was interrupted only by Sept. 11, they are on pace to handle more than 100 million passengers for the first time. Even with a modest rate of increase and a long list of improvements planned, they will reach their full capacity of 130 million annual passengers within 15 years, said William DeCota, the Port Authority's director of aviation.

"The trajectory always is up; there's no doubt about that," Mr. DeCota said. "By the year 2020, we will have

reached and slightly exceeded our ability to serve 130 million passengers."

In round numbers, he said, that would leave each of the airports at what is believed to be its maximum annual load: 50 million passengers at Kennedy, 30 million at La Guardia and 50 million at Newark.

The Port Authority expects cargo to pour in faster, compounding the problem. Mr. DeCota forecast that the amount of freight moving through the three airports could increase to four million tons annually by 2020, from less than three million last year.

To avert gridlock on the runways, Mr. Coscia said, "We're thinking into the future and working on developing viable options."

One point of consensus among aviation officials and analysts is that no major airport will be built from scratch within a two-hour drive of Midtown Manhattan. The only feasible solutions involve expanding existing airports on the periphery of the metropolitan area, they said.

"You can't build a 'green-field airport' because there is no green field," said Michael Boyd, president of the Boyd Group, a consulting firm in Evergreen, Colo. "There is no place within 100 miles of New York City where you can buy land for less than a bazillion dollars."

Mr. Coscia said a study of six other airports in the region that was commissioned by the Federal Aviation Administration could help identify one that could be expanded into a major airport. The study is analyzing the potential of Stewart International Airport in New Windsor, N.Y.; Long Island Islip MacArthur Airport; Westchester County Airport; Trenton Mercer Airport; Atlantic City International Airport; and Lehigh Valley International Airport in Allentown, Pa.

None of them represent anything like an ideal solution. Some are more than 60 miles from Manhattan, and none can be reached easily by mass transit. But they are all that aviation officials have to work with — though each one lies outside the Port Authority's territory, which extends 25 miles out from the Statue of Liberty.

"Adding new runways in an urbanized area is almost impossible, especially runways that are capable of taking commercial aircraft," said Roger Moog, manager of aviation planning for the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

The commission, based in Philadelphia, is working with the F.A.A., the Port Authority and the New York State Transportation Department on the study, which will gauge how much traffic each of the other airports could absorb and what political, physical and financial constraints would stand in the way, Mr. Moog said.

The political hurdles may be the most formidable for Mr. Coscia in his quest for a fourth airport. The phrase itself comes loaded with a lot of battered baggage, especially for the Port Authority.

In 1959, Mr. Coscia's predecessor Austin J. Tobin made a similarly bold declaration. Predicting that New York's three airports would reach their breaking points in about 15 years, he announced that the agency would spend \$220 million to build what he called the "fourth jetport" on 10,000 acres near Morristown, N.J., about 25 miles west of Manhattan.

But the affluent owners of farms and estates in Morris County used their influence to put a noisy stop to his plan. The land Mr. Tobin had set his sights on became the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, which for 45 years has stood as a reminder to politicians of the powerful "not in my backyard" sentiments that the roar of jet engines can stir.

"Rather than finding a fourth airport, we're finding a bunch of half-airports," said Jeffrey M. Zupan, a senior fellow with the Regional Plan Association. "If what you're trying to do is capture 25 percent of the market, no one of those is going to do that."

He, like other analysts, says there are a variety of ways of diverting some of the overflowing traffic without designating a fourth hub. Some outlying airports, for instance, might attract growing low-fare carriers, which might lure leisure travelers away from the bigger airports, those analysts said. The secondary airports might also capture some of the cargo bound for their areas.

Four decades ago, the region still held plenty of possibilities for a fourth airport. In 1961, the Port Authority investigated 17 sites, including the New Jersey Meadowlands and Pine Island, an onion-farming hamlet in Orange County, N.Y. That study concluded that Morris County was still the ideal location.

After the battle over the Great Swamp, the notion of a fourth airport lay dormant for about a decade before it was revived in the early 1970's by New York's governor, Nelson A. Rockefeller, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

In 1970, the transportation authority took over the Stewart Air Force Base, about 20 miles north of West Point, and proposed spending \$1 billion to turn it into a super jetport.

Consultants hired by the authority forecast that the region's airports would have to accommodate more than 160 million passengers a year by 1990 (and 250 million by 2000) and that Stewart could handle almost one-fourth of them.

The Regional Plan Association warned that those predictions could be wildly optimistic and that, with sharply rising oil prices dampening demand for travel, a fourth airport might never be needed.

"All that growth never happened in the 1970's," Mr. Zupan said. "There was a flattening out. New York took a nosedive economically. The economy and aircraft travel are very closely related."

Mr. Coscia and Mr. DeCota are acutely aware of that relationship. That is why they recently paid a visit to Charles Seliga, the managing director of Stewart International, which is operated under a 99-year lease by a British company, National Express Group.

Mr. Seliga, who once managed Kennedy Airport, showed off the master plan for expanding Stewart, which includes building a passenger terminal and lengthening the shorter of two runways to 8,000 feet from 6,000 feet. The airport's other runway, at almost 12,000 feet, can handle the largest commercial aircraft in use, he said.

Stewart is bigger than MacArthur, Westchester and even Newark. It sits on 2,200 acres near the junction of two interstate highways, the New York State Thruway and I-84.

Although it is 65 miles from Manhattan, Mr. Seliga said that distance should make Stewart more attractive as a reliever for the big three. Mr. Coscia would also like to see some of the private aircraft traffic diverted from the Port Authority's Teterboro Airport in New Jersey to Stewart.

"The beauty of us is that our airspace is completely different," Mr. Seliga said. "We're not near the water, so my weather is completely different."

Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University, endorsed the idea of a fourth airport as "a wise strategy for the 21st century" and said he favored Stewart because of its size and location. Stewart "is especially well suited for air cargo," Mr. Moss said, because "it has better highway linkages than any existing airport to the Midwest and New England."

Mr. Coscia said the Port Authority might invest in improvements at Stewart to attract airlines, even though doing so would probably require legislative changes in Albany and Trenton to the authority's charter.

"Most people don't want an airport in their backyard," Mr. Coscia said. But he added, "By and large, everybody's been supportive about Stewart."

Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, recently endorsed the proposal for a second rail tunnel under the Hudson River between Manhattan and New Jersey in part because it could eventually provide train service between the city and Stewart. The tracks of the Metro-North Railroad in Rockland County already pass within several miles of the airport.

But not every official of the Port Authority supports Mr. Coscia's big idea. Charles Gargano, the vice chairman, said he would prefer to concentrate on technological improvements and scheduling changes that could help squeeze more traffic through the existing airports.

"I feel very strongly that what we have to look at is how to use our airspace more efficiently," Mr. Gargano said. The solution, he said, "may not be a fourth airport, but rather new technology."

Mr. Zupan, an ardent advocate of mass transportation who lives just 30 miles from Stewart, said he doubted Stewart could attract enough travelers to justify building a rail link to it. For the near future, he said, there will be the big three airports and everything else. "The sooner we stop using the phrase 'the fourth airport' the better," Mr. Zupan said, "because what you're going to have is bits and pieces."

Correction: May 2, 2006

A front-page article on Saturday about a proposal for a fourth airport to serve the New York City area misidentified the location of a Metro-North Railroad line that comes within several miles of Stewart International Airport in New Windsor, N.Y., which is being considered for expansion. It is Orange County, not Rockland.

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