



Minneapolis/St. Paul Int'l Leverages Master Planning Process

By Jodi Richards



Collaboration and ongoing updates go a long way in supporting the master planning process at Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport (MSP). According to Dennis Probst, executive director of planning and environment, the approach has been honed over the years into one that involves all stakeholders and positions the airport for measured growth.

Probst has been with the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), which oversees operations at MSP, for 15 years and in his current position for four. He relates that in 1989, MSP officials were directed to examine the possibilities of staying at the current location and expanding, or building a completely new airport. That effort became known as the “dual-track planning process.” After seven years of study and analysis by MAC and a regional planning agency, officials decided that the airport would stay at its current location. The same year, 1996, officials



Dennis Probst

began building the airport's 2010 program.

This \$3.2 billion development program included an added runway, significant terminal expansion and a multitude of landside improvements to roadways, parking and auto rentals. “We really transformed MSP into what we think is one of the finest airports in the country,” Probst notes.

Decades Down the Road

During planning for the 2010 project, the 2020 Conceptual Plan was also created. This plan was intended to chart out the next stage of growth for the airport, but, as time went on, it became clear that the plan developed in the '90s would need adjusting, Probst relates. “It was driven by a number of things,” he explains, “[including] the change in the behavior of the airlines as well as operations and passenger numbers.” Another contributing factor was Northwest Airlines' decision to contract aircraft maintenance, which allowed the airport to expand the existing terminal building.

In 2008, MSP updated its Long-Term Comprehensive Plan, which extends to 2030. The new plan was adopted by the board and MAC in 2010, and the airport is currently working on an environmental assessment for the work through 2020. “We looked at actually four potential phases of development and bundled the work that we thought was going to be done between now and 2020 into an environmental assessment with the notion that we are moving forward at this time on a demand basis,” Probst explains.

Unlike the 2020 program, the 2010 program detailed a very specific set of improvements needed by 2010; but most of the work was completed by 2006, recalls Probst. “Obviously 9/11 changed things,” he adds. “It slowed down that process for a couple of years, but it really didn't change the overall need.” While the details of what was constructed may not precisely match the plan, the improvements that materialized were close to those prescribed using the dual-track approach.

“We're expecting a similar result this time,” notes Probst, “but the order in which things get done is not as clear.” Timing is heavily dependent on passenger traffic trends, which lately have been greatly influenced by low-cost carriers — those already servicing MSP and those that might enter the market. Spirit Airlines recently announced service at MSP. Delta Airlines, the airport's major tenant, will also have an impact on growth at MSP.

Here & Now

Being positioned for growth involves continually evaluating where the airport is and where it might be headed, says Probst. Within the next year, he adds, officials will have to make a decision about the airport's Humphrey Terminal. With new service from Spirit, the terminal is effectively filled. The challenges now, explains Probst, are determining how much expansion is needed, how much it will cost and getting the board comfortable with “pulling the trigger.”

“If an airline showed up tomorrow (wanting) two gates at Humphrey, I can't deliver those for about 24 to 36 months,” he adds, cutting to the chase.

Traffic in Humphrey Terminal has grown by 800,000 to 1 million passengers each year since the arrival of Southwest Airlines. Most of the increase comes from customers who traditionally would have been considered charter passengers largely going to vacation destinations. Last year, more than 3 million passengers traveled through Humphrey Terminal alone. MSP is also seeing significant and aggressive growth from U.S. Air, which flies out of Terminal 1.

Futurecasting

MSP's Capital Program lays out spending and anticipated projects over a seven-year period, breaking them down year-by-year. The list for each year is “run through a process” that includes all the departments in the organization, including tenants.

Probst describes the program as “fluid,” noting that projects planned for several years out are often pulled forward because of current conditions. “We try to have enough information and understand all the parts and pieces well enough that we can move reasonably quickly,” he explains.

While public entities have a reputation for being slow to get things accomplished, Probst says the collective attitude at MAC makes it “pretty darn quick” in reacting to what's going on in the industry.

“We try to be as analytical as we can,” Probst says, noting that MSP is fundamentally “fairly conservative” about capital spending. He further describes the organization as “entrepreneurial,” with people who are very committed to the airport and its level of service.

According to Probst, the structure of the airport board helps keep it productive. Although MAC is a public corporation, it's not a state agency, he explains. The governor appoints the chairman and 12 of 15 board members, who serve on rotating terms. The final two members are appointed by the



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mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul. "As a result, this board has never been political," notes Probst.

He primarily attributes the airport's success to being inclusive and collaborative. Working with all the players at the airport and in the surrounding communities, he notes, is vital to "making sure that we're responding in an appropriate way."

"We're certainly not perfect," he adds, "but when we do execute something, we're pretty confident it's going to work for its intended purpose, because the people that are going to be using it have been heavily involved in the decision-making process to get us there."

Wide-Lens View

Beyond understanding how the parts and pieces of its facility will fit together, MSP's planning encompasses issues such as local roads and other ways passengers get to the airport. "We try to be



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very deliberative in our process, to make sure we understand everybody's issues," says Probst.

He cites environmental assessments as an example, noting that consultants from every department within MAC are involved at various levels — looking at options, reviewing results, offering alternatives. "We sift that through a review process that we hope gets us to the best ultimate solution as we go forward," he describes.



Gary Christensen

Gary Christensen, project manager with Kimley-Horn and Associates, has worked with MSP for years and has been directly involved with a few cycles of master planning. "They have a very detailed approach," relates Christensen. Each year, officials make sure plans still make sense, check actual numbers against previous forecasts and react accordingly, he notes. If the industry slows down, projects may be delayed; if things pick up, initiatives may be accelerated.


He describes MSP's process as "very methodical and logical," yet still able to react to market demand. "They don't go

out and build something that will never get occupied," he notes. "And conversely, if the industry is going gangbusters, they're very quick to jump on projects and get them constructed."

Through all of these efforts, Probst notes that MSP manages to maintain low operating costs for airlines at the airport. Keeping per passenger operating costs in the lower one-third of all the large hub airports is, in fact, a board policy statement. "At the same time," he adds, "I think we're able to maintain a good relationship and be in a position to have facilities available in a timely way for carriers when they need them."

At its very roots, however, airport master planning is not an exact science. "I think the only thing that we're sure of right now is that the industry has changed in a very dramatic way; but it's not clear to us exactly what that means going forward — particularly into the longer term," says Probst. "For the next year or so, we're probably pretty comfortable. But, trying to be out five years, 10 years, 20 years is a much bigger challenge." ✈️

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