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From the Denver Business Journal:

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Denver auditor finds airport overbilled airlines by millions since 2022

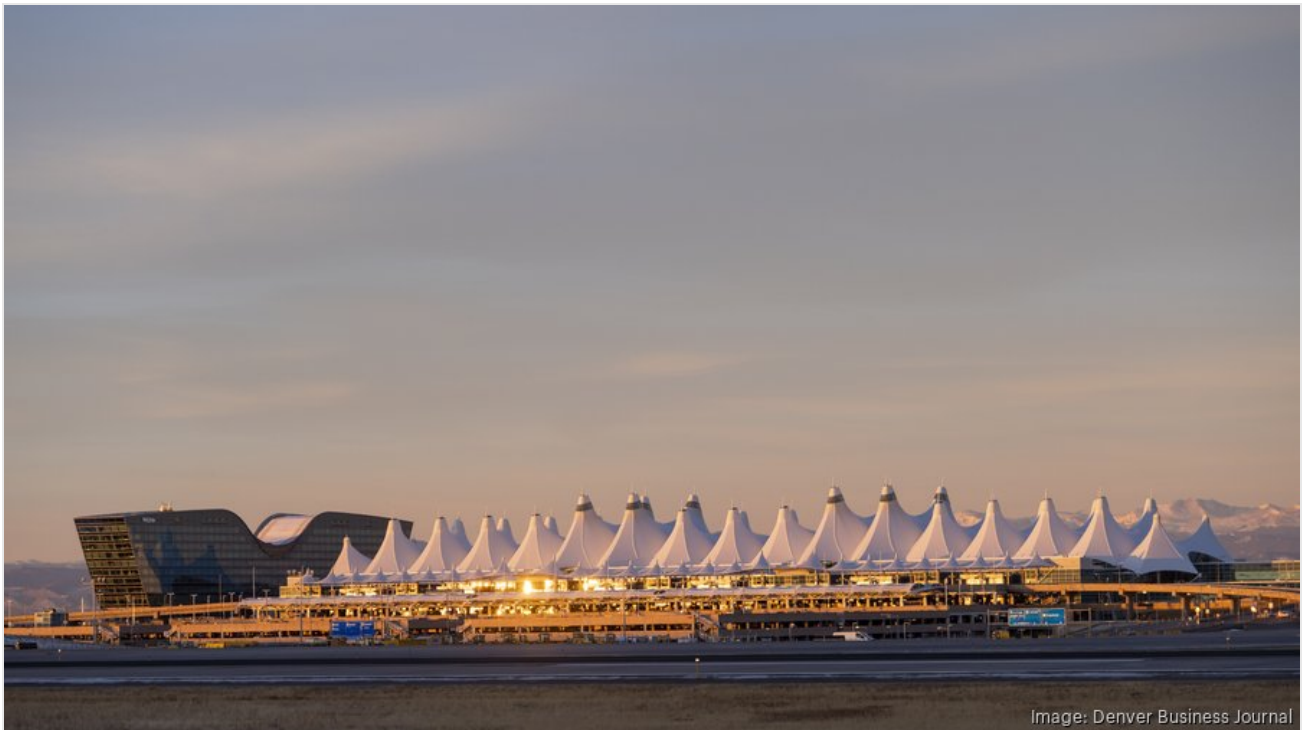


Image: Denver Business Journal

Sunrise at Denver International Airport on January 11, 2022, in Denver.

SETH MCCONNELL | DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL



By [Lincoln Roch](#) – Intern, Denver Business Journal

Jun 18, 2026 **Updated** Jun 22, 2026 11:39am MDT

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Story Highlights

- Denver International Airport overbilled United Airlines \$5.94 million from 2022 through 2025, the audit found.
- The airport also failed to collect \$1.6 million in interest penalties from United and Frontier Airlines, it said.
- Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien found weak billing processes and system issues at DIA.

[Denver International Airport](#) overbilled airlines \$6 million while also failing to collect \$1.6 million in interest penalties from [United Airlines](#) and [Frontier Airlines](#) in recent years, according to an audit released Thursday.

The report, from Denver Auditor Timothy M. O'Brien, found that the errors came from a weak billing process and said the airport's operations do not align with established policies and procedures.

O'Brien's office reviewed the airport's operating revenue from renting facilities to airlines and charging landing fees. It primarily focused on Frontier and United, which are the two largest signatory airlines at DIA.

The airport overbilled United by roughly \$5.94 million from January 2022 through last September. The audit blames system issues with DIA's process to calculate what it bills airlines for gate usage. In United's case, 89% of the overbilling came from airport staff improperly invoicing United for using gates it already was leasing, the audit said.

The airport uses a year-end settlement process to catch billing errors that are not discovered by staff during the year. The audit found that DIA overly relies on that settlement process, which also failed to catch \$352,000 in credits owed to United in 2024.

"The adjustments at the end of the year fall short of resolving issues," O'Brien said in the release. "Improving processes during the year to ensure billing, credits and invoicing are accurate will lead to a more efficient year-end settlement."

From 2022 through 2024, the audit found that United and Frontier incurred \$1.6 million in interest penalties from late invoice payments. It claims the airport did not collect the interest despite clear contract terms about penalties.

When asked about the audit's findings, United Airlines didn't express any complaints

"United Airlines works closely with airport leadership across all aspects of our operation, including financial processes. Whenever a question arises about a payment between United and the airport, we work quickly to identify and rectify any concerns," the airline said in a statement.

Frontier did not respond to a request for comment.

Additionally, the audit found the two airlines had more than \$13.7 million in outstanding and unapplied credits as of December. The release said that large, outstanding credits complicate the airport's ability to charge interest against overdue payments.

"We remain confident the practice by which billing and unpaid invoices result in either future revenue credits or additional billings for airlines works effectively for all parties," a spokesperson for DIA said in a statement to The DBJ.

O'Brien's office recommended that DIA Chief Financial Officer Michael Biel should "develop, document and implement procedures to include credit application to outstanding balances as part of the year-end settlement."

In a written response to the auditor's office on June 1, Biel disputed the recommendation. He said that DIA's Use and Lease Agreements would need to be changed to accommodate the recommendation, which would require airline approval. DIA reiterated that position in its statement to the DBJ.

"DEN's annual financial reports are audited by external auditors who have consistently validated these airport practices," the statement said.

DIA agreed with all other recommendations from the audit. [Biel was named CFO](#) of the airport in 2024 after [his predecessor left](#) to lead San Francisco International Airport. He had previously served as DIA's deputy CFO.

The audit also found that the airport failed to follow its own guidance for inspecting and billing spaces the airlines lease and monitoring gate use. The airport, which served [over 82 million passengers in 2025 and is among the 10 busiest airports worldwide](#), receives most of its airline operating revenue from facility rentals and landing fees charged to airlines.

O'Brien's office did credit the airport for making improvements from a 2016 audit. It said airport staff are more quickly billing airlines that change the spaces they lease.

"Denver International Airport has proven it can adjust to more efficient processes. We will conduct a follow-up audit to see whether the airport addresses the revenue issues we uncovered," O'Brien said.

The DBJ reached out to the offices of O'Brien and Denver Mayor Mike Johnston. Neither responded prior to publication.

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THE LIST

Denver's most popular airlines by passengers in 2025

Passengers - January through December 2025

Rank	Prior Rank	Business name
1	1	United Airlines
2	2	Southwest Airlines Co.
3	3	Frontier Group Holding Inc.
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