



Dane County Regional Airport

## SETTING UP A LONG RUNWAY

Dane County Regional Airport expands to attract more direct flights.

BY **KIMBERLY HAZEN**

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— **Michael J. Riechers**  
Dane County Regional Airport

Given that air travel has still not fully recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic, it might seem strange that the Dane County Regional Airport is planning an \$85 million expansion, but the pandemic was the perfect time to rethink the way we do things, and the airport is no exception.

The two-year project will remove the American Airlines extension at the south end of the terminal and replace it with six gates, concessions, a children’s play area, a nursing suite, and an indoor animal-relief area. The entire addition will add 90,000 additional square feet to the south end. “The way the gates are now, they kind of wrap around corners and have small parking spots for aircraft,” explains Michael J. Riechers, director of marketing and communications for the airport. “The addition is designed so that we can park more large airplanes.”

Those large airplanes are just the ticket for more nonstop direct flights from the airport, service that has been affected by the pandemic. At the end of 2019, Dane County Regional (MSN) offered 24 nonstop destinations and the pandemic cut that number to nine. Slowly and methodically, direct flights have been returning. As of the date of this writing, the number of direct flights serving the airport was 12.

Business travelers are particularly familiar with MSN. Pre-pandemic business travel made up 60% of the traffic, while leisure travelers comprised 40%. Now, with nonstop destinations returning, it’s notable they are not the cities of pre-pandemic times. Nonstop service from Madison now includes service to Las Vegas, Phoenix, Denver, Charlotte, Orlando, Tampa, Fort Myers, and the recently announced Miami.

However, the addition of fun-in-the-sun

destinations is by design. As travelers are more willing to get on planes, leisure travel is returning at a quicker rate than business travel. “I think we know what our customers are asking for,” states Riechers. “They’re asking for New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, D.C., and Boston, and we’re diligently going after those routes.”

The airlines have to see the economic value of flights that accommodate business travel before they are added. In the meantime, they add the flights that make sense to their bottom line, and that means vacation destinations. “We all know that airlines have been massively disrupted and they’re going to have to rebuild,” notes Zach Brandon, president of the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce. “But the economic data on business travel is really trending in Madison’s direction.”

An advocate for business, Brandon believes the airlines that don’t see this might be missing out. “If they just see us as a ‘tier-two’ market, or don’t see the growth potential, they are missing opportunities.”

Riechers believes that Madison has the community assets to support a robust return to traveling — in any form. “Higher income means higher disposable income, which means more leisure travel,” he states.

High disposable income also could be the key to adding new direct routes, but the rebuilding of air travel might not take as long as expected because nonstop routes are set up far faster than in the past. “When an airline was considering a new route, we’d be looking nine to 12 months out for the inaugural flight,” Riechers explains. “Now that planning window is four to six weeks. We’ve just completely revamped in order to react to where people are willing and able to travel.” ■