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TOP STORY

## Demand surges at Alaska airports for cargo and passenger flights

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Mar 14, 2021



Passenger traffic at Fairbanks International Airport is expected to be significantly higher this summer. News-miner file photo

Alaska air traffic and airport development are surging to meet demand for more cargo and passenger flights, as growing numbers of Americans make online purchases to avoid shopping malls and plan travel to remote vacation spots including Alaska due to COVID-19 concerns.

The uptick in airport traffic in Alaska extends to two new airlines flying out of Fairbanks International Airport starting in late spring to accommodate pent-up demand for tourism, since COVID-19 idled the hospitality industry in 2020, with most Americans sheltering in place, at home.

Sun Country Airlines will offer weekly nonstop summer service to and from Minneapolis/St. Paul, largely in response to vacation demand from visitors headed to Denali National Park.

American Airlines likewise will offer daily summer nonstop service to and from Dallas/Fort Worth and Chicago to handle the increased number of vacationers.

Both passenger services are slated to start at the end of May 2021 and run each year to early October. Alaska, Delta and United airlines are among the commercial passenger services already offered at the Fairbanks airport.

“Fairbanks has always marketed itself as a place to embrace the natural world,” Angie Spear, airport manager at Fairbanks International Airport, said in a prepared statement.

As more people hibernate at home since the COVID-19 virus started in 2020, Alaska’s airport handlers also report a bear market for package shipping. Most of that air cargo comes through the Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage, the sixth-busiest cargo airport in the world.

That growing demand for shipping packages within the U.S. and globally will result in up to three new airport warehouses and an updated fleet of UPS and FedEx aircraft in Alaska. The developments are expected to add more than \$25 million in labor income — in construction and permanent jobs — to the state economy.

John Binder III, deputy commissioner of DOT, told Alaska lawmakers this week that the state has been in negotiations with a trio of aircraft and cargo handlers that will add jobs and revenue to the Alaska economy.

Alaska Cargo and Cold Storage is proposing to develop a 700,000-square-foot refrigerated warehouse at Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage. The warehouse will provide storage for temperature-sensitive products, including food, plants and pharmaceuticals, to be transported domestically and internationally. Wild-caught salmon and perishables such as peonies are expected to be exported to Asia and other foreign markets. Binder estimated that construction will add 2,075 temporary jobs. The warehouse will employ about 160 people, with a projected \$13.5 million in annual labor income.

IC Alaska, also based at the Anchorage airport, would develop a weather-protected aircraft storage and repair warehouse that includes so-called “hardstand” parking for up to 14 aircraft. The project would produce 150 construction jobs. The facility would employ up to 220 people. Binder said that the project includes a “targeted equity investment” of \$500 million plus \$2 billion to be spent in-state.

6A, located in the West Airpark, would consist of a 195,000-square-foot transfer facility, along with six paved areas for aircraft parking. Binder estimates there would be about 130 new construction jobs to develop the facility and 120 permanent jobs once 6A opens. The jobs would yield about \$10 million in annual labor income.

In addition, UPS and FedEx plan to expand airport parking to accommodate new, larger planes at Ted Stevens airport. UPS is acquiring Boeing 747-800 aircraft. FedEx is bringing in new Boeing 777 aircraft to replace its MD-11 fleet.

At the Fairbanks International Airport, Amazon also is slated to open a warehouse this month to handle the growth in e-commerce air shipping, hiring 40 employees to sort packages before they are sent to post offices for customer delivery.

Alaska's international airport system is made up of Fairbanks International Airport and Ted Stevens International Airport, both owned and operated by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.

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