

Airport growth soars to record

By Dan Ping
Editor

SANFORD — Growth at the Orlando Sanford International Airport (OSIA) was stagnant in 2003, but passengers have returned in full force since January.

In June the airport set an all-time record as 195,000 people used the facility. That mark stood for just a month. Nearly 280,000 passengers used OSIA in July, a 44 percent increase of the month-old record.

"We've seen incredible growth here at the airport this year," said Larry Dale, president and CEO of the Sanford Airport Authority. "This is the busiest time of year for us anyway, but the growth we're seeing is unlike anything we've seen in the past."

International traffic, which has long been the majority of the airport's business, was up 48 percent in July compared with July of 2003. In all 171,597 foreign travelers — a record for international travel

— passed through OSIA, up 55,919 from July 2003.

Passengers from the United Kingdom made up the largest majority of international travelers with 152,167 Brits passing through OSIA.

"British travelers seemed to be enthralled with the United States, particularly Central Florida," Dale said. "We have a strong market in the U.K., and the monetary exchange rates are such that right now is a good time for them to travel to the states."

Domestic traffic continues to post the biggest gains. In July, 107,679 passengers used the airport compared to 58,317 passengers who traveled through Sanford in July 2003 for an 85 percent increase.

"On the domestic side, we're seeing our biggest growth primarily because of the number of carriers we have and the number of destinations," Dale said. "Having Vacation Express back in Sanford has helped, but Southeast Airlines and TransMeridian are doing their

part as well. Overall, I think the convenience of the Sanford airport combined with the popular destinations the carriers offer is the reason for our growth."

Since January, OSIA has seen almost 1.1 million passengers travel through the airport. Airport officials expect to break the annual record for passengers sometime in August or early September. The current record of 1.26 million passengers was established in 2002.

Traditionally, the airport posts its biggest numbers in the months of May through September. That trend will continue to hold, but Dale predicts the airport will see substantial increases in the number of passengers who travel through Sanford from October to April because of additional domestic destinations combined with service from Toronto.

"The Canadian market will

boost our numbers in the winter significantly," Dale said. "The Europeans travel to Florida during the summer. The Canadians, on the other hand, come in the winter."

The growth at the airport hasn't come without some problems. The airport's parking lots overflow into grass lots as residents across the region utilize the airport. More parking attendants have been hired, as well as additional janitorial help.

"We can't have all these people come through here and not let the place be clean," Dale said. "We've added bathroom attendants during our peak hours to keep the facilities looking good."

As for parking, a new parking garage is in the preliminary engineering and permitting stage, and Dale anticipates that once construction begins, the structured parking facility should be completed in about six months.

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