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Big ideas for dealing with congestion at Logan

January 21, 2024

By Fred Salvucci

A recent flight out of Logan International Airport reminded me of the Massachusetts Port Authority's multiple missions, and their mixed results.

Within the terminals, conditions are excellent and comfortable. But outside of the terminals, runways, taxiways, and gates are getting very crowded. At curbs outside the terminals, there is chaos. The roadways that serve Logan and the core of the Boston metropolitan area are increasingly choking with traffic.

The challenges facing MassPort and its next executive director are substantially different than those dealt with in other major airports and airport agencies. A traditional search within the airport and aviation world is not likely to find the right kind of leadership for the approaching challenges at MassPort.

Logan Airport is closer to the downtown area of its home city than any other airport in the US other than San Diego. The "external" impact of auto congestion caused by Logan is additive to the congestion challenges faced by other major cities, and other external impacts such as noise and air pollution affect close-in populations in East Boston and Chelsea in ways unusual at other airports.

The institutional structure of Massport as a multi-modal agency is also relatively unique in the US, similar only to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. This unique structure provides Massport the opportunity to consider much more innovative policies.

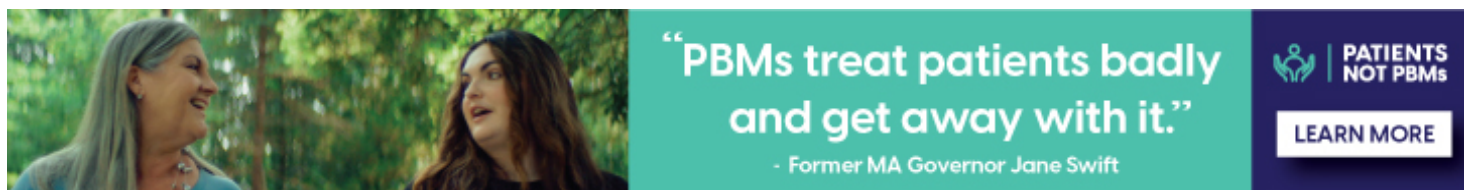
With growth approaching and exceeding capacity, the context is changing. The challenges of the near term and foreseeable future at Logan are quite different than those Massport has dealt with successfully in the recent past.

That said, the competency of the existing staff at Massport is an important asset. It will be essential for the agency to continue to function well while gearing up to face new challenges.

The near crisis conditions in East Boston caused by the closing of the Sumner Tunnel for repairs should have been a wake-up call. The closing of the Sumner was carefully timed for the summer, when traffic is lower, benefited from a post-Covid dip in traffic, and was mitigated by public transportation alternatives and free fares on the Blue Line. Nonetheless, the congestion was severe, and an indication of what will occur all year, every day, after a few more years of air passenger and commuter growth.

The scale of the new challenges is also illuminated by Gov. Maura Healey's new climate change recommendation that intercity trips not longer than 250 miles belong on rail, not aviation. This policy direction is almost certainly correct in terms of climate change policy, but it represents an enormous challenge to implement while continuing to serve the needs of the Massachusetts economy to connect regionally, nationally, and internationally. Existing passenger rail connections to New York on the Acela are fully utilized, and the route via Worcester and Springfield is only in early planning, so major changes are required to provide reasonable alternatives for intercity trips.

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The existing situation at Logan is complex and multifaceted, and demonstrates clearly the challenges ahead. These challenges are complicated by the fact that Massport doesn't have control over all facets of airport operations.

Within the terminals, Massport has done a good job expanding space for passengers, using its unique powers vis-a-vis airlines to ensure cooperation in the complex relocations required to accommodate passengers while rebuilding terminals.

On the runways and taxiways, which are largely controlled by the Federal Aviation Administration, conditions are close to capacity and will require reprioritization of the use of available space within the near future, leaving little lead time for implementation.

At the curbside, current modes of accessing Logan exceed practical capacity. Massport has had a difficult time getting cooperation from private companies like Uber to manage the situation.

On the roadways leading to Logan, the doubling of cross harbor traffic capacity added by the Big Dig has now been fully utilized. There is no slack to accommodate the future expected air passenger growth (which will occur in combination with auto commuter growth, especially because of a constrained MBTA).

For these reasons, the new executive director will need to be focused on developing and financing very non-traditional activities and policies. For example, the Logan Express bus network must grow by orders of magnitude, including adding new locations at South and North stations and at the Turnpike at Route 128. Massport should also significantly increase the frequency and capacity of the bus connections so that Logan Express can become the primary means both to access the airport and for visitors to access Massachusetts destinations.

Massport should partner with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the MBTA to expand passenger rail capacity from South Station, including consideration of a new rail tunnel to Logan.

Massport should partner with airports such as Manchester (NH), Green (RI), Worcester, and Bradley (CT), rather than viewing other airports as competitors. The Massachusetts economy benefits from close proximity to these airports, and their under-utilized facilities can better absorb some of the Massachusetts growing passenger demand.

Massport will need to partner with the FAA to use congestion pricing of landing fees both to discourage excessive use by smaller aircraft and generate new revenue.

Vehicular traffic entering Logan should face significant new tolls to discourage excessive use, and to generate the revenue needed to finance alternatives.

These are all major new initiatives that will take enormous creativity and skill, and should be core

objectives in the search for a new executive director at Massport. The same old playbook won't work for tomorrow's challenges.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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