

ONTARIO

Inland airport celebrates flying solo

Hub boosts income, flights since cutting ties with L.A. agency in 2016, officials say

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Celebrating five years to the day since Ontario International Airport broke free from Los Angeles, officials on Monday boasted that the unshackled Inland Empire airport has become a viable option for more travelers and an economic engine for the region.

About 350 city, county, airport, airline and state representatives gathered at the Ontario Convention Center to mark the anniversary, hearing how the independent airport increased passenger and cargo traffic, developed new sources of revenue and plowed federal grants into improvements to runways and taxiways.

Airport officials gave a short

history lesson, looking back on the past and on the new administration's actions during the past five years.

After a seven-year campaign complete with bumper stickers that read "Set Ontario Free," Ontario airport cut all ties with Los Angeles World Airports on Nov. 1, 2016, and transferred ownership to a joint governing authority composed of the city of Ontario and San Bernardino County.

The Ontario International

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Ontario International Airport Authority President Alan D. Wapner discusses changes at the airport over the past five years during the State of the Airport address Monday.

WILL LESTER
 STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Airport

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Airport Authority cut expenses, raised cash by leasing vacant land to cargo companies, added new terminal concessions that included a first-ever ramen-dispensing vending machine, increased parking revenue and brought in Ontario police and fire departments to handle public safety, explained Alan Wapner, an Ontario City Council member and president of the authority's board of commissioners.

"There isn't a person in this room that isn't touched in some way by the airport," he said from a ballroom stage. "The economic impact is in the billions of dollars, with hundreds of thousands of jobs depending on our airport."

San Bernardino County Supervisor Curt Hagman, speaking by video, said: "There is no greater economic engine for the Inland Empire than Ontario International Airport."

During the past five years, the number of airlines operating there increased by 50%, as did the number of nonstop destinations, including service to Hawaii added this year. Total departures climbed from 403 to 460 per week, while the number of passenger seats jumped from 52,000 to 66,500, the airport reported.

In 2019, the airport moved 5.5 million passengers — a 10-year high — and was named the fast-



WILL LESTER — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ontario International Airport Authority President Alan D. Wapner speaks during the 2021 State of the Airport address in Ontario on Monday. The event, held at the Ontario Convention Center, celebrated five years of independence from the hub's former governing agency, Los Angeles World Airports.

est growing airport in the United States by Global Traveler, an industry publication.

Air passenger volume fell 90% starting in March 2020 and by 50% at year's end during the coronavirus pandemic. However, the airport has seen steady growth since and is the fastest recovering airport in the country, Wapner said.

In September, passenger volume reached 97% of pre-pandemic levels, with the airport welcoming 453,000 air travelers, more than

double the September 2020 volume of 195,000, officials reported.

As the pandemic eases and more flights are added, passengers are finding Ontario airport more convenient than other airports, officials said.

"It's the same reason that attracted people pre-pandemic: convenience," Wapner said in an earlier interview. "It is the closest airport for a lot of folks. They can find parking easily. Plus now we have more affordable rates."

Wapner noted that the return of Jet Blue, the addition of flights by Southwest Airlines and new international flights to Mexico and El Salvador have boosted air traffic. China Airlines has restarted flights to Taiwan, although they are less frequent than before the pandemic, in another nod to the slow addition of international flights, Wapner said.

Air cargo has also been a success story. The airport will have its second-best air freight year by Dec. 31,

he said, trailing only 2020, when online ordering soared and freight volumes rose by 20%.

Cargo hubs accounted for \$1.5 billion in business from 2016-2021, doubling air cargo volumes, officials said. Amazon and its cargo airline, Prime Air, plus FedEx Express and UPS have experienced air freight growth at the airport, making it first in the United States for outgoing freight shipments.

Wapner said that with the jam-up of ships at the

ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, more companies are moving goods by air, and Ontario could benefit.

"When we started there was no Inland Empire. Now it is time we step up and really become that empire," Wapner said.

Saying the airport is behind in public transportation links, he mentioned a project being planned by The Boring Co. and the San Bernardino County Transportation Authority that will whisk passengers in high-speed electric transports by tunnel between the airport and the Metro-link station in Rancho Cucamonga.

He also said the airport is looking at prototypes of electric airplanes to reduce its carbon footprint. The airport is working on converting gasoline and diesel-fuel ground vehicles to natural gas and battery power, he said.

Atif Elkadi, the airport's deputy chief executive officer, who emceed the event, said the relationships with carriers, hotels, Omnitrans, the Transportation Authority and new concessionaires such as Dunkin were the focus of the five-year building period.

The only obstacle to growth is the difficulty concessionaires are having finding people to fill job openings, Wapner said. The same goes for filling slots for pilots and flight attendants, he said.

"This feels like the closing of the first chapter," Elkadi said, "and we are about to start Chapter 2."