Discussion:

The Dallas–Fort Worth Regional Airport

Adrian Delfino
United Airlines

> The rapid growth of air transportation in the United States has far ourstripped the knowledge and experience essential to direct it efficiently. Many important decisions are necessarily being made daily without waiting for the compilation of enough data or the training of enough experts.

The material I just quoted came from the jacket blurb which introduced a monograph on airports published in 1930 by the Harvard University Graduate School of City Planning.[1] Reading that paragraph, a student of airport development might logically expect some discussion on airport history; some lessons learned from prior experiences in designing, financing or administering airports; or some hypotheses developed by the authors from the extensive data they presented in the book.

Unfortunately, the material concentrates on the "how to" of airport planning; namely, site selection, runway design and stress criteria, aircraft traffic patterns, service facilities, financing and administration. It focuses on the state of the art in the late 1920's and projects facts and figures for the years ahead. It lacks historical perspective; it lacks empirical observations.

When I heard that Dean Steele and Jack Downey were jointly presenting a paper on the development of the Dallas/Ft. Worth Regional Airport, my historical juices began to flow as I thought to myself, "At last, some scholar has chosen to shed light on the elusive and neglected subject of airport development."

To confirm my feeling that airport development has indeed been a neglected area of historical inquiry, I went to our company library and checked the computer run on publication titles related to airport development. I found 658 publications on this general subject, with topical discussion ranging from financing through computer simulation models, congestion, master plans, forecasts, design analyses, environmental research, subsidies, land use and zoning practices, community impact and on to such topics as snow removal and runway grooving.

These publications, presented in formats that varied from multi-volume works to mimeographed leaflets, were prepared by a wide range of authors, including airport consultants, Air Iransport Association staff members, auditors, graduate students of business administration and employees of the Federal Aviation Agency, state aeronautical commissions and the airlines. City coverage was similarly dispersed, with all major metropolitan centers represented, as were a few of the small-town airports.

While they varied in a great number of ways, the publications shared one thing in common: each focused on the state of the art as it prevailed at the time the study was prepared. Again, the historical perspective was missing; the valuable lessons from the past left unexplored.

Regrettably, this lack also is the major weakness of the Steele-Downey paper on the Dallas/Ft. Worth Regional Airport. Other than one fairly long paragraph toward the end of the

discussion, there is no attempt to relate the airport's current problems -- if there be any -- or its future to past developments, which surely must have had some impact on the airport's current status as a major transportation hub in the nation. As a matter of fact, discussion of the facility comprises only about a sixth of the entire dissertation. Ihe balance of the material is devoted to a general commentary on regional airport planning.

Now, maybe the authors never intended that the material would be an historical treatise. If such is the case, permit me then to discuss the paper in the light of a "how to" presentation that focuses on the current scene.

My first comment is that Dean Steele and Mr. Downey have pinpointed the major areas that require coverage in any discussion of airport development. They have made accurate and astute observations on the current state of and noticeable trends in air transportation. Ihey have properly noted the changing life-style in our country, the increasing availability of leisure time and discretionary income, and the expanding role of air freight in the world of business.

In this particular segment of their discussion, however, I would question the validity of their statement that "today, older people are flying as much as or more than the young due to the availability of funds and lack of fear." History shows the reverse is true: the young generation is flying as much as or more than the older people today. Iravel patterns in the past

have gravitated around business trips, which generally are identified with the older people. And where pleasure trips have been made by air, the parents usually made them. Thus, the older generation historically has been the traveling generation.

Within recent years, however, increasing numbers of youths have taken to the air, and there are many factors that contributed to this development: the growing affluence of our young people, the early exposure to air travel on the part of those who were drafted into the armed forces and were moved from one military installation to another by air, the introduction of youth fares and other airline pricing innovations, and the appeal of such present-day phenomena as rock, folk and jazz festivals throughout the country and abroad.

I would say, then, it is the young generation who is slowly displacing the older people in the cabins of jetliners today. And I seriously doubt that the element of fear has been a signigicant factor in the changing pattern of air travel.

I concur with the authors' development of the three base line approaches to the question of how to get more units of air travel in and out of a given geographic region at the least cost in dollars and energy and with the least disturbance to the environment. They have identified these approaches as (1) centering on an existing airport; (2) grouping several airports as a region; and (3) creating a new regional airport. On the other hand, I feel that the discussion in this particular segment might

have been greatly enhanced if the authors had included specific examples of the three approaches they proposed.

For example, any isolated airport, such as Logan in Boston, Hopkins in Cleveland, or those in Portland, Tulsa or Seattle/Tacoma, could typify the approach which centers on an existing airport. The second approach, which groups several airports as a region, might be typified by the Port of New York Authority, which operates Kennedy, La Guardia and Newark. And of course Dallas/Ft. Worth Regional Airport, could typify the third approach.[2]

In discussing the evaluation of plans for a new airport, Dean Steele and Mr. Downey set down six sequential stages of development: preparatory funding and community groundwork, strategy of planning, basic economic agreements, funding implementation, cost control systems and regional economic impact. In this connection, I would ask the authors if the omission of "political administration" was inadvertent, or do they feel that this area is inconsequential in the evaluation of airport plans. I would tend to think that selection of the proper agency to administer the airport would be a very important part of the planning. Should it, by way of example, be a city commission? Or should it be a county agency, or a super-body whose power derives from one or more sovereign states?

On the subject of preparatory funding and community groundwork, Dean Steele and Mr. Downey have properly identified the

significant issues involved. However their approach to the subject is too simplistic, and one gets the impression that any of the avenues proposed will solve the problem of airport funding. The painful truth is that airport funding has long been and will continue to be a major area of differnece between airport users and operators.

Bonds -- be they of the revenue, general obligation or special facility types -- are simply an interim funding technique designed to produce instant capital which will permit prompt construction. In the end, it is the user who retires the bond through rental payments, landing fees, special assessments or taxes and other forms of payment. Because of this situation, the question of user-operator relationship becomes a major item in any discussion of airport funding.

Here again, we could gain much from an historical approach to the subject.

Currently, the airports of the nation represent an investment of some 9 to 10 billion dollars, and it is estimated that this will exceed $20 billion before 1985.[3] Of this amount, the airlines, which are the major users of airports, carry a debt burden of some $5 billion, which is roughly 55 per cent of the lowest figure given above.[4] Prior funding problems have revolved around the ability of the user to pay what airport operators consider to be his fair share of the cost. This problem has been alleviated to some extent by establishment in mid-1970 of the

Airport Development Air Program (ADAP), which is financed by a trust fund to which passenger, shippers, the airlines and general aviation contribute. I say "to some extent" because ADAP grants are restricted to real estate ecquisitions and landing area improvements and usually cover only half of these airport development costs, with the other half supplied by the community on a matching basis. The more costly terminal development projects are not eligible for ADAP grants.

More recently, two significant issues have arisen in discussions or airport funding. One concerns the diversion of user payments to finance non-airport-related activities of a community; the other concerns the growing clamor among users that they be allowed to participate in determining whether a specific airport improvement project is both beneficial and necessary, the rationale being that the user evnetually pays for it. Thus we see the importance of devoting some attention to user-operator relationship in any discussion of airport funding or basic economic agreements.

I have just two other comments to make on the Steele-Downey paper.

In their discussion of funding implementation, the authors state that to establish a solid financial base, one of the first definitive steps to be taken is the acquisition of land for the airport. Agreed. But then they say that a prime reason for this early land purchase is to give additional visibility and

creditiliby to the airport project. The fact that early purchase of land prevents speculators from moving in and plying their art in mentioned farther down in what appears to be an afterthought. I would think the orders here is reversed. Thwarting land purchase then the need to invest the project with visibility and credibility.

And as an airline employee, I would question the authors' statement that passenger concourses are an outgrowth of airline operators' concern "that the jet engines might suck people right off the ramp and grind them through the engine." Viewing things from an historical perspective once again, let me say that the airlines' concern for passenger safety has been with us a long time and will be with us for a even longer time. Before the jets came on the scene, there was the concern that passengers might walk into a spinning propeller and get decapitated. Yet, airport operators did not build fingers on the ramp until the propeller planes were well established. It is difficult therefore to relate the building of terminal fingers to passenger safety. I would think instead that concourses were built to provide an efficient, orderly and comfortable system for the loading and unloading of passengers on and off airplanes whose capacities doubled those of preceding-generation aircraft.

Ladies and gentlemen, I must apologize for sounding like a "nattering nabab of negativism." But I find it difficult to separate the airline man from the historian in me, so I have

viewed the paper from both frames of reference.

But all is not lost. Dean Steele and Mr. Downey have produced a valuable document for airport planners. They have successfully made the distinction between airport design, which they say is "the satisfactory solution of problems that exist," and airport planning, which they define as "the anticipation of future problems so that design can be effective over time." The ability to make this distinction is a vital requirement for the airport planner, and I am delighted to see that the authors have given this due recognition.

Airport design is NOW. Airport planning is HENCE.

How wonderful it would have been in the authors had only reached back in time and provided the THEN for a truly rounded story of regional airports.

FOOINOTES

1. Henry V. Hubbard, Miller McClintock and Frank B. Williams, Airports: Their Location, Administration and Legal Basis (Cambridge, 1930).

2. See also Airports of Iomorrow: Report of the Regional Airport Conference on Its Plan for Development of An Airport System for the New York Metropolitan Region (New York, 1947) and Kenneth G. Clare, Southern California Regional Airport Study, (South Pasadena, Calif., 1964).

3. San Francisco International Airport - Its Origin and Development, an historical survey prepared by United Air Lines, Inc. for the airlines serving San Francisco International Airport (Chicago, 1973).

4. Air Transport 1972, annual report of the U.S. scheduled airline industry, published by the Air Transport Association of America (Washington, D.C., 1972).