MAPPING THE JOURNEY
DCA Adds New Gates and Revamps the Security Areas to Transform the Traveler Experience

BY DAVID WARD

Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) may lack the global profile of its nearby neighbor, Dulles International Airport (IAD), but still serves an impressive 23 million passengers annually.

The downside of that is that DCA was originally built to handle only 15 million passengers a year and features a pre-9/11 design that can make getting from one gate to another an awkward experience.

In order to deal with the record-breaking number of travelers, many of them on smaller regional jets, the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority (MWAA), operator of DCA, is in the midst of Project Journey, a massive $1 billion infrastructure overhaul.

Conceived in 2017, Project Journey will not only add 14 gates in a new concourse, it will also completely revamp the security areas so that passengers will be able to enjoy all the airport has to offer. The concourse is being built by New York-headquartered Turner Construction at a total cost of $385.5 million.

"Project Journey will transform the passenger experience at Reagan National by alleviating crowded hold-rooms and providing greater connectivity between gates," says Richard Golinowski, vice president for operations support for MWAA. "When construction is complete, travelers on American Airlines regional jets will have direct access to planes via jet bridges, along with spacious waiting
and boarding areas. Concurrent with Project Journey, American Airlines is expanding its baggage conveyance system to tie into the new concourse.”

For passengers, the biggest change will be no longer needing to pass through a second TSA screening or take a bus when going from gate to gate. “Project Journey will establish not one but two security checkpoints that will lead into a spacious hall connecting four airline concourses,” says Golinowski. “As a result, passengers will have the opportunity to explore more food and beverage options convenient to their flight.”

The two new security checkpoints, which will total 50,000 square feet when completed, are being built above the existing arrivals roadway and curbside and will provide DCA with up to 9,000 square feet of new space for concessions and other amenities aimed at improving the passenger experience. In addition, the new 24gate concourse will add nearly an additional 14,000 square feet of new concessions space.

Golinowski says RFPs for the new concourse concession opportunities have already been issued and bids are expected back this fall. A final decision on selected brands and operators will come at the end of the year. “The RFP process for space that the airport will gain from the removal of the current security checkpoints is planned in the upcoming months,” he adds.

In addition to providing more retail and food and beverage options, other new traveler amenities will include an indoor pet relief area, mother care rooms, diverse seating options and another American Airlines Admirals Club.

Designed by AIR Alliance, a joint venture between AECOMand PGA, the concourse appearance and feel will be consistent with DCA’s Terminal B/C’s exposed metal beams, glass walls and domed ceilings while also maximizing open, navigable gate areas and providing panoramic views of downtown Washington D.C.

When finally completed in summer 2021, American Airlines will occupy all 14 gates in the new concourse. Justin Franco, global communications spokesman for the carrier, says American Airlines has worked hand in hand with the Project Journey team and the MWAA throughout the design and construction process while also sounding out travelers to find out what they wanted so the new concourse can better serve both its customers and the overall airport community.

“Some notable items include the updated baggage handling systems and converting hardstand positions into full-service indoor gates,” Franco says. “This will also allow the elimination of busing operations between terminals B and C and to regional aircraft.”

Golinowski says that one benefit will be the ability for American Airlines to up-gauge its regional jet fleet from 50-seat to larger aircraft that still meet the slot control requirements.

But he adds that is not expected to dramatically boost annual passenger volume numbers, saying, “Due to airfield limitations and constrained land acreage, no major change in flight capacity is expected once the project is complete.”

MWAA is funding Project Journey with passenger facility charges and airport bonds, which Golinowski says are ultimately paid for through airline rent and other future revenues.

Construction began to gather momentum this year around the terminal and the surrounding support roads. Currently underway are installing pile foundations on sidewalks and medians adjacent to existing roadways on the arrivals level of Terminal B/C and erecting structural steel above the inner and outer lanes of the roadway on the arrivals level of Terminal B/C.

Work this year also includes preparing existing pedestrian bridges for connection to 50,000 square-foot security checkpoint structures and installing a secure divider wall consisting of steel-beamed bays, individual glass panels and stainless-steel mesh on the ticketing level in Terminal B/C.
Communications Effort

MWAA realized that construction directly above the existing arrivals area would create some disruption for passengers both entering and leaving the airport and so developed an all-channels communications approach to keep both the local media and community not only up to data on Project Journey milestones, but also aware of potential delays caused by the infrastructure work.

That includes not just regular tweets and messages, but also a dedicated project website, www.FlyReagan.com/ProjectJourney. MWAA has also keep the local media engaged with press releases and on-site visits.

“MWAA has taken the lead with proactive media interest with support from us when needed,” Franco, of American, says. “Their team does a phenomenal job with communicating with American and other key airport stakeholders with ongoing and upcoming projects that may affect our customers or team members.”

The carrier augments the MWAA outreach with specific messaging for customers in pre-departure messaging sent via e-mail 24 hours to departure. “Additionally, we have mutually crafted and shared employee specific messaging and talking points for our sales managers who handle corporate accounts,” Franco says.

In order to maximize the DCA passenger experience, American is also renovating all its existing Admirals Club lounges at the airport and will be adding one more club when the 14-gate regional concourse is completed. The carrier is also adding up to 70 electric charging stations in the new concourse and faster Wi-Fi.

It also plans some new amenities for their most valued customers. “When DCA’s terminal expansion is finished, top-tier Concierge Key American Airlines guests may be greeted plane-side by concierges who will drive them to their connecting gates via Cadillac,” Franco says.