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While the aviation industry has endured constant change throughout its history, the current global economic turmoil is neither incremental nor temporary. It threatens many airports with disruption and possible closure and calls for concerted actions to avert negative impacts. The stakeholders in this turmoil include airlines, airports, consultants, local communities and federal agencies. Depending on one’s perspective, these dramatic changes point to a future that can be opportunistic and exhilarating or declining and disheartening. An imaginative attitude is essential for airports to develop the winning strategies necessary for countering economic uncertainties.

Stakeholder Roles

The most significant shift in airport stakeholder roles during the past decade has been the increased responsibilities many airports have assumed from the airlines. Two of the most obvious changes are the non-exclusive use of aircraft gate positions and, to a lesser extent, ground support equipment services. The increasing utilization of Common Use Terminal Equipment (CUTE) is another general transition of responsibilities away from the airlines and more towards airports.

As a result of these shifts, consultants are becoming more engaged in the economic development of the community in the vicinity of the airport. To some extent, airports of all sizes and the airlines that serve them have already begun to forge business relationships with non-aviation partners to create economic advantages for themselves, local businesses and the traveling public.

Said another way, airport developers are no longer viewing their role as limited to supporting the airlines. They are striving to consolidate aviation and regional forecasting, planning and funding methods to maximize long-term economic viability for all. This unified approach is requiring changes to a process that relies on significant cooperation among regional entities that are unaccustomed to such close collaboration. Airports and their consultants are in an ideal position, increasingly taking advantage of the opportunity to lead this shift and establish partnerships that include regional planners, financial forecasters, master developers, and private side investors in addition to those traditionally involved in airport development.

An industry benchmark is needed for planning future airports and their neighboring regions. It includes planning for sustainable growth that will connect the business district, convention centers, hotels and the lives of the airport community’s residents. Planners also need to assume that an increase in airport privatization will likely occur, perhaps accompanied at some point with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) roles becoming primarily regulatory. Three scenarios that can be helpful to consultants and their airport clients as they consider effective actions are Off-Site Industry Reinvention, On-Site Reinvention and Regional Airport System Integration.
Off-site Industry Reinvention
A number of cities and smaller communities are in the midst of redefining or reinventing themselves due to the restructuring of businesses served by their airport. Detroit Metro Airport provides a good example.

Wayne County Airport Authority CEO Lester Robinson states:

“Detroit is the hub of America’s auto industry and its airport is the hub of Northwest Airlines. Both of those assets are in trouble and are taking steps towards re-inventing themselves for survival in the global economy. Without a doubt, the transformation will take place and be successful based on the entrepreneurial spirit of both industries and the skill of the region’s work force.”

Strong, deliberate regional partnering will be essential if Detroit Metro Airport is to craft a viable plan for adjusting its aviation services and initiating resourceful non-aeronautical revenue sources that benefit the public, local businesses and the airport.

On-Site Reinvention
Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport (DFW) and Port Columbus International Airport are two examples of airports that are responding more to on-airport influences and opportunities.

DFW was challenged early on when American Airlines transformed the airport into its major hub. Initially, the design had to be modified to facilitate passenger connectivity between terminals. Then, security check points needed to be accommodated. That was followed by the realization that international passenger capacity was inadequate. Like many other airports, their facilities adapted to these changes. Recently, as federal government funding has dropped, commercial development has been stimulated by granting gas and oil exploration rights to qualified interests. Says Jeff Fegan, CEO of DFW:

“DFW is one of several US airports which were not a product of the transformation of a military field or an expansion of a city airport. It is also the beneficiary of visionary location and acreage, both of which have already proven to be crucial to its success. The willingness of Dallas, Fort Worth and Texas leaders to continue to invest in the airports reinvention has produced remarkable results.”

Since 1964, Port Columbus International Airport has been the headquarters of the nation’s first aircraft charter company, now called NetJets. Knowing that NetJets was developing plans for a significant expansion of their charter and flight training services, the airport management approached the company to see what the airport could offer to keep NetJets based in Columbus. By working with NetJets, the airport was able to incorporate new buildings, parking areas and runway improvements into their facility expansion plans accommodating every requirement necessary for the company to continue operations at Port Columbus.

Regional Airport System Integration
Smaller airports have unique challenges when it comes to maintaining viability, particularly today, when more than 100 airports have lost scheduled commercial service. Sarasota International Airport (SRQ) demonstrates a unique and successful approach to enhancing a small airport’s economic environment. The airport combined its conventional airport fee abatement and marketing assistance program with a demonstration to air carriers that when an airline is located at SRQ, its market share also increases at nearby Tampa International Airport (TPA).

SRQ first enhanced their website, then added travel planners and live flight tracking to make passenger ticket purchases more convenient. If the price or schedule options did not fit the travelers’ needs, they could use a simple drop-down menu on the airline’s website and check the TPA flights and schedules, which had a wider range of selections. This option enabled local residents to use SRQ more often and provided a loyal base of flyers for new airlines serving SRQ. It also enhanced the airline’s market share at TPA, since the SRQ traveler stays on the particular airline website to make the final purchase. Through their website, SRQ was able to offer consumers an added level of convenience and a reduced level of stress in the ticketing experience than was provided by the larger airport facilities in the region.

Conclusion
Do we have the ability to be forward thinking and imaginative outside of the usual comfort zone? Should we start creating our teaming partnerships with regional planners, financial forecasters and master developers? If so, when? Do we continue to follow “today’s accepted methods” without looking at the possibilities associated with “thinking like a business”? These are particularly important questions and opportunities now, while the market is more open to fundamental change.

Some airports with constrained sites may look to partnering more closely with their region to offset their physical boundary limitations. Other fortunate airports that have large sites may be able to establish off-setting revenue sources by developing non-aeronautical activities on airport property. In addition, regional partners can combine the assets of more than one airport in a region to enable all parties to benefit.

The solution for every airport is different. It’s up to each airport and their consultants to determine the most well suited solution for their unique circumstances.