

## Omaha's Eppley Airfield among nation's fastest-growing airports. Here's why that matters

By Brad Davis / World-Herald Business Editor - Feb 4, 2019

More people than ever used Omaha's airport last year, for the first time pushing Eppley Airfield past the 5 million passenger mark as more airlines offer more service.

Eppley was among the country's fastest-growing airports when it comes to capacity, or the number of seats available for purchase. Among the 61 largest airports in the United States, Eppley ranked No. 17 in capacity growth in 2018, clocking a 7.3 percent rise from the previous year.

So far this year, the growth in available seats is even sharper, good for a No. 7 ranking among the country's largest airports, with a 9.2 percent rise, according to preliminary data from Diio FlightGlobal, which tracks airports around the world.

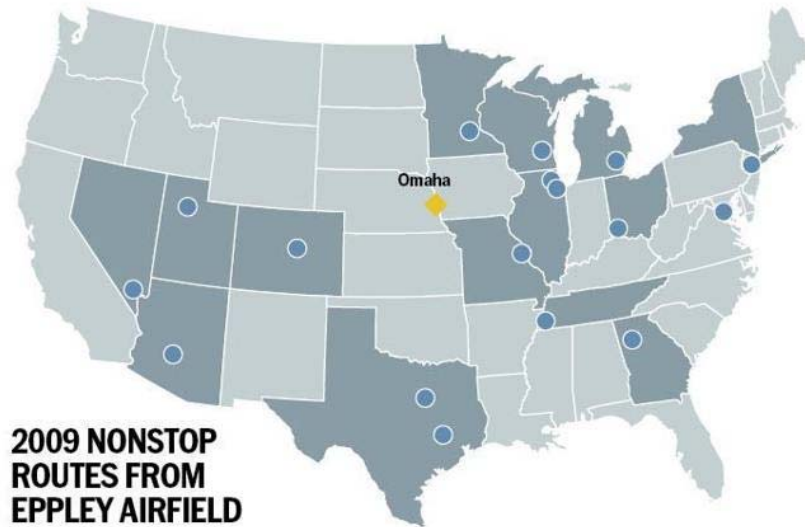
Those figures aren't just another trophy for Omaha's award case. They matter. When a company is looking for a place to expand its workforce, it wants nonstop flights to major cities around the country. The more flights a city can offer, oftentimes the better the chances it lands a new corporate or regional headquarters.

"It makes it easier for us to make the case that while we're not a hub for a single airline, you can literally get anywhere in the world from here — and a lot of it is nonstop," said David Brown, president and chief executive of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, which is charged with luring new companies to the region.

And more seats are good for leisure travelers, too. Ten years ago, Omaha travelers couldn't reach popular destinations on the West Coast — at least not nonstop. Eppley's data showed people were traveling to, say, San Francisco or Seattle, but there weren't any direct flights.

Since then, airport executives say they have worked hard to expand Omaha's nonstop offerings, and the airport's passenger figures show as the flights have expanded, travelers — leisure and business alike — have in large part gobbled them up.

In 2009, Eppley had 17 nonstop destinations. As of February, it now offers 34. Included are nonstop flights all the way down the West Coast: Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego.



**2009 NONSTOP ROUTES FROM EPPLEY AIRFIELD**

- |                               |   |                            |
|-------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| 1. Atlanta                    | 7. Detroit                                | 12. Minneapolis            |
| 2. Chicago Midway             | 8. Houston (George Bush Intercontinental) | 13. New York City (Newark) |
| 3. Chicago O'Hare             | 9. Las Vegas                              | 14. Phoenix                |
| 4. Cincinnati                 | 10. Memphis                               | 15. Salt Lake City         |
| 5. Dallas (Dallas/Fort Worth) | 11. Milwaukee                             | 16. St. Louis              |
| 6. Denver                     |   | 17. Washington, D.C.       |

SOURCE: Eppley Airfield

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For Julie Imgrund, owner of Bellevue Travel, a local agency, the new nonstops to the West Coast are “godsend.” People can take flights directly to Seattle and then board an Alaskan cruise, she said — a popular option for her customers. “We absolutely love any nonstops that come into Eppley Airfield,” she said.

In 2018, the airport handled 5,043,194 passengers, a 9.4 percent increase compared with 2017 figures and Eppley’s fastest growth rate since 1996. That’s a sharper increase than other airports in the region. Consider their 2018 passenger figures:

- St. Louis: 15.6 million, 5.9 percent increase.
- Kansas City: 11.8 million, 3.4 percent increase.
- Des Moines: 2.8 million, 7.6 percent increase.
- Wichita: 1.7 million, 2.8 percent increase.
- Lincoln: 293,886, 5 percent decrease.

David Roth, the Omaha airport's executive director, said Eppley's figures underline the region's strong economic underpinnings: With a low unemployment rate and solid growth, airlines are adding seats and passengers are buying them.

Steve McCoy, Eppley's director of operations, said the airport is focused on building its "depth" along with its breadth: In other words, instead of just one daily nonstop flight to San Francisco, the airport has landed a second, on United, that begins this month.

Those types of connections to business, financial and tech hubs are critical for Omaha to sell itself to the wider world, said John Boyd, head of the Boyd Co., a Princeton, New Jersey, company that helps firms find sites to locate their businesses. He has done work in Omaha and across the country.

"That is going to create new momentum and it will provide additional arrows in the quiver of Omaha economic development officials," he said of Eppley's expanded route map to key cities.

He said one of the reasons Omaha has lost out on "signature projects" in recent years has been its relative lack of air service. Conagra Brands, for instance, he said, cited Chicago's "premier" air service out of O'Hare International Airport as a reason for moving its headquarters to that city from Omaha. (O'Hare has more than 160 nonstop flights to U.S. destinations and more than 60 to international ones.)

Air service is a "major" consideration when companies look at where to expand, Boyd said, "especially for the types of projects Omaha is competing for — corporate headquarter projects, regional headquarter projects."

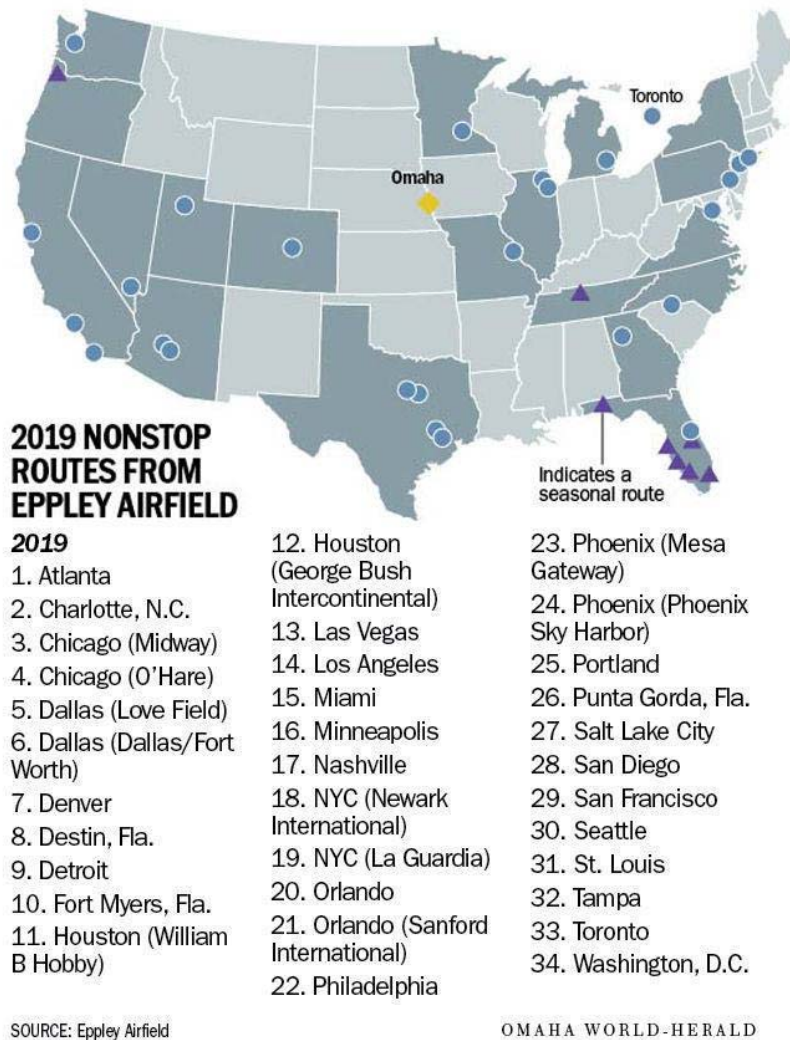
Omaha, Boyd said, always has been able to point to its easy in, easy out airport: near to downtown and without clogged security lanes and long taxi lines. That's still true, he said, but "today, companies want it all, including direct flights to major global markets."

To that end, Omaha's first-ever regularly scheduled international flight that began last year, a daily nonstop on Air Canada to Toronto, could go a long way in opening the city to possible investment from Canada and beyond, Boyd said.

Brown, of the chamber of commerce, said one of the organization's focuses in the near term is so-called foreign-direct investment — or persuading international companies to invest in Omaha.

Once those prospective employers get to Omaha, they could soon be seeing big changes at Eppley: The 2018 passenger count bumps up against a trigger in the airport's long-term plan that calls for the next steps in a major renovation and expansion of the facility. (Already, the parking garage and new rental car facility under construction is part of an earlier phase of the renovation.)

The airport could see 5.4 million passengers this year, the next trigger for the renovation project. Eppley is seeking bids for that phase of the renovation, an overhaul of the terminal — the place where you print out boarding passes, check and pick up luggage. By the end of the year, the



public should have a rendering of what the updated Eppley terminal could look like. The \$400 million to \$500 million project could be complete within five years.

And as Eppley bumps up against even higher figures — 7 million passengers is the next target — plans to renovate and expand the concourses will be solidified. Those are the areas where you actually board and disembark from flights. Those could be on the table as early as the end of this decade, according to the airport’s projections of passenger counts, which of course could change.

The projects are to be paid for by grants from the Federal Aviation Administration, airport revenue, bonds and new passenger and customer facility charges.

In the meantime, Roth and McCoy, with the Omaha Airport Authority, said Eppley is making changes to make the facility more welcoming: GPS in its mobile app to let customers track parking shuttles, better Wi-Fi, new food and drink options, updated furniture, more electrical outlets and fill stations for water bottles, which they said have been quite popular.

And if passenger counts keep growing, that's not all that will change. "It'll happen," Brown said of the airport's march to expand further. "It's just a matter of time."