

## TRIANGLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

### RDU's ranking upgrade could help the Triangle lure a 'big fish,' economist says



*RDU, which added a BurgerFi to Terminal 2 earlier this month, was just upgraded in a ratings list that takes food and beverage options into account.*

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Raleigh-Durham International Airport is moving up in the world of airport rankings, something that could mean a boost to the region's economy - perhaps attracting the attention of the next big company with plans to relocate.

RDU is now a “large” airport – upgraded from “medium” in the latest J.D. Power study of North American airports. The airport ranks fifth on the report in terms of passenger satisfaction. However, J.D. Power also has a mega airport category with 20 airports — from JFK, Orlando and Atlanta to Charlotte, Miami and O'Hare.

Michael Walden, economist and professor at North Carolina State University, says the ranking and the upgrade are “a big deal and a major positive for RDU.”

“J.D. Power is well respected in the industry,” he notes in an email, adding that the upgrade helps advance the region when it comes to economic development. “This improved ranking should help with business recruiting – especially for the ‘big fish!’”

And there are a lot of big fish. John Boyd, a site selection expert out of New Jersey, points to one such fish as paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams, which has publicly disclosed its own search for a new headquarters. Boyd notes that one of the drivers behind its interest in possibly leaving Cleveland is “the lack of air service.” And he says the timing for J.D. Power's rankings release “couldn't be better for North Carolina.”

“I expect this [ranking] to help catapult Raleigh-Durham into the discussion,” Boyd says, pointing to other likely contenders for Sherwin-Williams as Dallas, Atlanta and Charlotte. “[Airports] are a critical site selection variable... especially for the types of headquarters and regional headquarters Raleigh-Durham is increasingly competing for.”

Both public records and interviews with executives show the airport is already a major consideration when companies are considering the Triangle for expansions and relocations. Jennifer Fitzgerald, CEO of Policygenius, said in a recent interview that airport accessibility was essential in her firm's decision to bring 377 jobs to downtown Durham.

“A few things really stood out, and one was just the proximity and the ease of going back and forth,” Fitzgerald said. “The airport is great. It’s a very easy flight... The logistical piece was important.”

The J.D. Power North American Airport Satisfaction Study ranks airport customer satisfaction across multiple categories, from security check to accessibility to terminal facilities. It also includes food and beverage offerings.

And it splits airports into three categories.

- Mega: 32 million or more passengers per year
- Large: 10 to 31.5 million passengers per year
- Medium: 4 to 9.9 million passengers a year

RDU’s explosive passenger growth tipped it into “large.” Last year, RDU saw 12.8 million passengers, an 8 percent increase over 2017. And this year, more than 14 million travelers are expected.

Joe Milazzo, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, says that, while the J.D. Power results "confirm what the business community has seen over the past several years - we have an excellent growing airport," they also draw more attention to the challenges ahead.

"The level of growth also highlights the urgency for identifying solutions for needed infrastructure," Milazzo, whose group recently formed a coalition focused on just that, says. According to the Federal Aviation Administration, RDU is the 39th largest airport in the U.S. in terms of passenger volume.

And RDU continues to add new flights to its lineup - attracting the attention of more flyers. Frontier Airlines, RDU's fastest-growing carrier, recently announced new nonstop flights to Atlanta, Miami and Newark. And Delta Air Lines, the airport's largest carrier in terms of passengers, has a new nonstop to Jacksonville.