

## **A Decade of Growth for ECP**

**By Del Lee**

It has been 10 years since Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport (ECP) replaced Panama City-Bay County International Airport (PFN). On May 23, 2010, ECP opened on a 4,000-acre plot of land in northwestern Bay County that was donated by the St. Joe Company. Since then, the Airport has become an essential gateway to the Northwest Florida Region. In 2019, approximately 1.3 million travelers passed through ECP, setting a record, and as the Region's tourism and businesses continue to boom, ECP makes plans to continue to meet growing and changing travel demands.

Celebrating a 10-year anniversary during a global health pandemic that has brought the aviation industry to a halt in recent weeks feels bittersweet. We feel grateful and overjoyed for the Airport's growth as we look back at the successes over the past decade. We want to celebrate the passengers, the partners and the team members that were instrumental in those successes. At the same time our hearts go out to everyone who can't travel right now, as well as those on the front lines in our Region, State and Nation fighting to end COVID-19.

Our footprint continues to expand as we further strengthen our network with new routes, giving passengers even more travel options. Having a thriving Airport is valuable for the entire Region. It means more outbound flight options for residents and more opportunities to welcome passengers traveling for pleasure or to conduct business in our area. We are proud of ECP's growth, and while growth has not been easy, it's been accomplished with hard work and the unwavering dedication from partners sharing a common goal: to constantly build upon and improve our surrounding economy.

We have come a long way since we opened our doors, thanks to the support of our team, our Board of Directors, and strong community partners including Bay County TDC, Walton County TDC, Bay County Chamber of Commerce, Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce, Bay County Economic Development Alliance (Bay EDA), and Walton Area Chamber of Commerce to name a few. ECP is poised for even more growth thanks to the collaboration of all our partners.

The Airport and the Region's economic partners work each day to attract new companies and explore the expansion of existing companies. Over the past decade, ECP and Bay EDA have worked hard to attract new businesses to the Airport. It is a long process, and we are seeing positive changes and hope to soon announce projects that will diversify our businesses at the Airport. Our Region has faced challenges, such as the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, the closure of an aerospace company that had recently planted roots at Venture Crossings adjacent to the Airport, and now the current pandemic. However, we've continued to see tremendous growth in our local economy and have helped to create jobs in the area.

Since opening day, Southwest Airlines and Delta Air Lines have been signatory airline partners. In 2015, we proudly welcomed United Airlines, and in the Spring of 2018, American Airlines began daily nonstop service at the Airport. Today, all four airlines are signatory airlines and are committed to our Region. With each growing season, our airline partners enhance service to meet the demand of both tourists and locals traveling through the Airport, and in our peak season offer more than 16 nonstop route options to major hubs for passengers.

Over the last 10 years, we have made changes to ensure a positive passenger experience including updating the bar/restaurant, gift shop, offering multiple ground transportation opportunities, relocating the Military Welcome Center to better serve our military, retirees and their families, but the biggest change is the addition of 7,000 square feet of expanded Terminal near the boarding gates and soon all gates will have passenger loading bridges.

As part of our Master Plan, we continue to work toward improvements designed to satisfy long-term projected aviation demand in a logical and financially feasible manner. We are now in the early phases of a 20-month master plan analysis and update. The goals for our Master Plan consider key terminal building areas, runway systems, parking, business development, environmental aspects and more.

We're also excited about improvements outside our doors. In partnership with FDOT, State Road 388 is being realigned and a new roundabout will improve the intersection leading to the Airport by providing more seamless access for entering and exiting traffic, with completion scheduled by 2024. The area around the Airport is thriving as well, at Venture Crossings with a Hilton Garden Inn and development of Latitude Margaritaville Watersound.

Our number one priority is the safety and security of passengers and staff. Among other safety improvements and mandatory FAA emergency drills performed regularly, ECP became the first airport in the nation to install a fully operational drone detection and defense system. This ensures the safety of arriving and departing aircraft in partnership with Panama City-based drone detection technology company, DeTect.

Like all other industries, COVID-19 has impacted the aviation industry globally, and ECP has seen travel decrease by more than 90 percent since early travel restrictions were put in place. The Airport, in partnership with the airlines, is working to make your travel experience safe. The Airport is ensuring high touch areas are cleaned and disinfected regularly and is practicing social distancing whenever possible. The Airlines are thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting their aircraft between flights to ensure your safety. When the time is right, our Team looks forward to welcoming travelers back to ECP, and we stand ready to meet the demand that we know will continue.

Airports are special places. The Terminal is a place full of excitement for long weekend getaways, emotional “see you again soon,” heartfelt reunions among friends and family, and warm welcome homes for our returning heroes. This pandemic reminds us of other moments in history when industries like aviation took a hard hit but returned from crisis and recovered even stronger. Our Region is no different with our resiliency to natural disasters on the main stage over the last few years. With each challenge, we always come together, lift each other up and come out stronger.

We are proud of how far we’ve come as an Airport, as a community and as a Region, and we look forward to the next decade of growth ahead.

*Del Lee is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport.*