



CHARLOTTE COUNTY
Economic Development

WEEKEND WAVE

12-23-16



Friday Economic Roundup

FLYING HIGH

Airport busts through million-passenger mark

By **TED CARTER** Staff Writer Charlotte Sun

The year brought Punta Gorda Airport a milestone of more than 1 million passengers and the dawning of a new summer travel season.

The 1.01 million passengers is through the end of November, with another month of numbers to go for 2016, according to airport records.

The million mark is a "huge deal" for Allegiant Air, Lukas Johnson, Allegiant's vice president of network and pricing, told the *Sun*. "We had only three markets (served by Punta Gorda) three years ago. Now we're at 31," he said.

Meanwhile, that growth has led Charlotte County's business and civic leaders to begin examining how the county can leverage that million-passenger count to help make the county more of a destination for business and recreation.

But efforts so far have brought more frustration than success, leaders of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce and Charlotte Harbor Visitor and Convention Bureau say.

Allegiant, an ultra-low-fare, Las Vegas-based carrier, will wrap up the year with passenger traffic in and out of Punta Gorda Airport up 30 percent over 2015, according to Johnson. He

said Allegiant flights in and out of Punta Gorda Airport account for 10 percent of all Southwest Florida air traffic.

Not surprisingly, Allegiant wants to build on that growth.

"We've got one new market for next summer," Johnson added, though he declined to name it.

Additional flights are likely as well for the traditional winter and spring travel seasons, but he said, "I can't tell you much."

He mentioned the Cincinnati market in the next sentence, however, noting Cincinnati/Northern International Airport in Covington, Kentucky, is "our biggest" route from Punta Gorda, followed closely by Indianapolis.

Passenger growth has also earned Punta Gorda Airport, airline code PGD, a priority spot on airports to be served by the new Airbus C20s that Allegiant will add to its fleet at the end of 2017, Johnson said.

"We're looking at basing some of them at PGD", he added. "They can carry more passengers and be more reliable" than the older aircraft that are part of Allegiant's fleet of 83 aircraft.

Denver's Frontier Airlines began service at PGD in late October. The low-fare airline did not respond to calls and an email seeking information on 2017 route plans. The company said in September, however, that it won't decide whether to keep the service to Trenton, New Jersey; Philadelphia and Chicago and add new destinations until near the end of its current route schedule that ends in February. Passenger counts up to that period must first be evaluated, Frontier has said.

Emergence of summer passenger counts that have begun to rival totals from winter and spring months did not entirely surprise Allegiant, according to Johnson. "We noticed it two years ago," he said.

Floridians and northern transplants to Southwest Florida want to beat the heat and Allegiant offers a low-cost way to do an escape out of the area, he noted.

"We're providing something that no one else in the region is doing," Johnson said. "We're chasing them (the summer passengers) while other carriers pull back."

What he hears from Southwest Florida residents with roots in the North is, "I love my friends and family, but I don't want to visit them in the winter." A portion of the summer traffic is also coming from residents in the region who have second homes in the Smoky Mountains and can catch Allegiant flights from PGD to destinations near there.

In June, 98,000 people flew in and out of PGD.

July's numbers rose to 106,000 and August showed 81,800.

By contrast the popular Florida destination months of February showed 91,130 passengers for PGD; March 121,695 and April with 98,101.

James Parish, Charlotte County Airport Authority executive director, said the full passenger parking lots are a welcome sight in the dog days of summer.

"Summer traffic seems to be a continuing trend as Allegiant has stopped cutting a significant number of flights in the summer," Parish said. "People are filling those planes up. I think the main reason summer travel is up is the flights are offered at great rates and people can afford to take a trip."

The airport chief said he is looking for an even bigger year in 2017 and in the years beyond.

"We see some growth in Allegiant but more in 2018 and 2019 when the new Airbus fleet is online," he said.

In the meantime, Parish is encouraging Frontier to try new cities. "We are hopeful that they will next year," he said.

Former airport chief Gary Quill has said changing the airport's name to Punta Gorda Airport from Charlotte County Airport earlier this decade significantly boosted the airport's marketing and perception of the airport.

But more than a name may have been lost.

Some leaders in the community say the airport's ties with its home county have seemingly diminished as the airport's standing as a passenger facility has increased. The Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce and Charlotte Harbor Visitor and Convention Bureau say promoting their organizations inside PGD's expanded terminal is too expensive for their budgets.

Airport Authority Commissioner James Herston asked fellow commissioners in November to consider letting the Charlotte Chamber put a kiosk in the terminal to promote destinations and businesses in the county. Herston offered to pay any cost for the presence of a kiosk himself.

Can't do it, he was told, with airport staff citing a contract with advertising agency Corey Airport Services that runs through the end of 2025.

Commissioner Robert Hancik would like Herston's proposal to have received more consideration than the few minutes of discussion it got. "The terminal doesn't really promote Charlotte County," he said, contrasting that with the support an airport he ran in Springfield, Missouri, gave its local businesses and destinations.

"They just want to preserve the advertising dollars," Hancik said.

With the current policy, the airport is going to get a few thousand dollars in advertising money but at the same time forsake an opportunity to promote Punta Gorda and the rest of Charlotte County and its ample fishing, boating and hospitality offerings, Hancik said, and added he expects the issue to be part of continuing policy discussions among airport commissioners in the coming year.

In years past, chamber groups could put a stack of community guides in the terminal and pay the airport \$30 a month.

"They went out the door like candy," said Julie Mathis, director of the Charlotte County Chamber, of the promotional publications.

That option is no longer open to chambers in the county at "a reasonable cost," Mathis said. "I would love to be able to do that if it is affordable."

While Mathis said a kiosk staffed full time by chamber volunteers is probably unfeasible, she emphasized she thinks a county government entity such as the Airport Authority is missing an opportunity to promote the county. "I know people would love the opportunity to showcase our community," Mathis said.

Her worry, she said, is that Punta Gorda Airport terminal will become a place to highlight businesses and destinations in Fort Myers and Sarasota rather than its own community. "I want the airport to showcase Charlotte County and not be a showcase for communities to the north and south of us."

Lorah Steiner, director of the Charlotte Harbor Visitor and Convention Bureau, said she shares Mathis' concern that Fort Myers and Sarasota will soon shut her agency out of a chance to promote the county to the tens of thousands of people arriving at the airport. Those neighboring cities will overtake any promotional opportunities at the terminal "because they have the money," Steiner said.

The Charlotte Harbor VCB wanted to buy wall space and a presence on airport monitors but the airport asked for more than the visitor promotion organization could pay, Steiner said.

"It shouldn't cost you \$30,000 to \$35,000 to have some presence there," she said, and noted the VCB has helped build passenger totals at the airport through the meetings, conferences, trade shows and destination promotions it has done over the years.

Steiner said a recent VCB survey showed that 8.5 percent of the passengers who fly into PGD plan to stay one or more days in the local area.

"The 8.5 percent is more than we thought we were getting," she said. "Our challenge is to increase that number."

To that end, the VCB buys multipage ads in Allegiant's inflight magazine, she said. "It's a way to show passengers what they can see and do here."



FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

- Florida one of the nation's fastest-growing states in last year ([AP](#))
- Osceola high-tech research center on target for late March debut ([Orlando Sentinel](#))
- Florida leads the nation in private-sector job growth ([Florida Trend](#))
- Is this South Florida startup headed for an IPO? ([South Florida Business Journal](#))



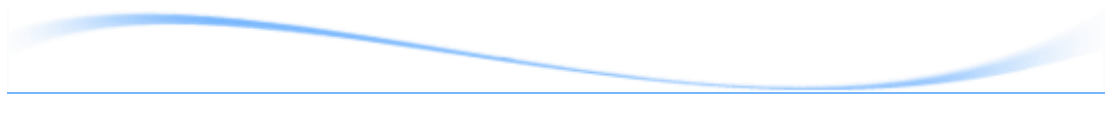
US ECONOMIC NEWS

- US economy grew at 3.5%, fastest in 2 years ([AP](#))
- Sales of existing homes best in nearly 10 years ([AP](#))



ENTREPRENEUR NEWS

- Small business owners follow the senior demographic ([AP](#))
- Follow the 'Three Pillars of Customer Success' to improve your bottom line ([Ron Stein](#))
- Here's how to improve your concentration: Quit multitasking ([Jerry Osteryoung.](#))
- Helping Florida's veteran entrepreneurs ([WMFE](#))



[Join Our Mailing List!](#)

Charlotte County Economic Development Office
18501 Murdock Circle | Suite 302
Port Charlotte, FL 33948 | 941-764-4941
FloridaEDO@CharlotteCountyFL.gov
<http://www.FloridasInnovationCoast.com>

