

Megaresort boom set to fuel McCarran growth

By [Richard Velotta / Staff Writer](#)

SARASOTA, Fla. — McCarran International Airport will be the third-fastest-growing major airport in the country during the next five years, an aviation consultant says.

Mike Boyd of the Evergreen, Colo.-based Boyd Group said McCarran can anticipate a 15.5 percent increase in enplanements through 2013, to 27.3 million, trailing only airports in Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee in terms of growth.

Boyd announced his projections at the conclusion of the 12th annual aviation forecast conference in this Gulf Coast city.

The McCarran projections are based on anticipated demand resulting from the opening of several giant resorts, including MGM Mirage's CityCenter and Boyd Gaming's Echelon.

Mike Boyd said only "running out of water" would keep McCarran from growing at a double-digit percentage rate.

Rounding out the top 10 for growth were airports in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Detroit, Chicago, San Francisco and Denver.

In the Western region, which includes California, Oregon, Washington and Nevada, long-term growth is projected at 16 percent over the next five years, second only to the Great Lakes region (20.2 percent).

Because other large airports are also growing, McCarran is expected to maintain its ranking as the sixth-busiest airport in the country.

With 27.3 million enplanements forecast, Boyd is predicting that McCarran would blow past the airport's projected capacity of about 53 million total passengers before a new reliever airport planned in the Ivanpah Valley is built.

Boyd and his forecast team based their projections on the analysis of more than 145 airports nationwide and included population, economic factors, airline service trends and extraordinary local factors to reach their conclusions.

Boyd said McCarran is assisted in its growth by being a hub airport for US Airways and a major transit point for passengers of Southwest Airlines.



A passenger walks to the baggage claim at McCarran International Airport. With major resort projects coming online in the near future, McCarran is expected to remain one of the busiest airports in the nation.

Photo by Sam Morris

Nationwide, Boyd expects passenger counts to grow by only 4.2 percent over the next two years because of several problems facing airports and airlines. In some major hubs like Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and New York's John F. Kennedy International, the Federal Aviation Administration is proposing schedule cutbacks to fix an overtaxed air traffic control system.

"The airline industry has misread the situation," Boyd said, "and is doing nothing to counter these forces of congenital stupidity. "We're working with the FAA ..." is like working with your captors."

Boyd said one of the worst parts about reducing flights to cut airport congestion is that airlines will trim flights to and from small communities that may only have one or two flights a day. The end result, he said, would be artificially constrained travel demand that would cause economic and service disruptions.

On the plus side, Boyd said, demand is on the upswing for international flights, which will bode well for many cities.

"Increasingly, access to international Asian gateways connecting hub sites will be critical," he said. "Traffic generated by China and India represent enormous behind-the-hub plumbing, and communities that don't have nonstop access to such hubs are in trouble."

Boyd said several factors are affecting traffic patterns. Among them:

- The cost of oil. Airlines like Southwest haven't been able to take advantage of cost hedging as they have in the past.
- The slowing economy. As the economy slows, there will be less discretionary spending on tourism.
- Slower growth by low-cost carriers. Competition is heating up among such airlines as Southwest, AirTran, Spirit and Virgin America.
- The weakness of the dollar. That could boost flying at some U.S. border cities as Canadians come across the for less expensive domestic flights.

Another airport geared for double-digit percentage growth is Reno-Tahoe International, Boyd said. Among nonhub markets, Reno ranks 11th in the nation with 18.7 percent growth in enplanements expected in the next five years.

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