

Airport Sustainability | It's Here

By Shawn M. Kinder and Eugene R. Peters

With Vanity Fair devoting a full issue to the green movement, the Oscars spending more time talking about carbon emissions than Scorsese's first award and sales of hybrid cars up more than 50 percent from last year, the sustainability movement has truly taken the mainstream by storm. Meanwhile, some airports have made doing business smarter a way of everyday thinking, while others grapple with a reasonable approach that lies somewhere between recycling aluminum cans to (unreasonable) thoughts of eliminating aircraft ground taxiing.

Air travel is a focal point of the environmental movement, with many pundits taking potshots at what seems to be a dirty, inefficient, antiquated industry. Sustained worldwide growth in aviation demand, however, illustrates that people both desire and require aviation. Demand continues to grow, as does the awareness and passion for the environment. In one form, those traveling have taken the initiative. For instance, passengers are embracing the idea of "carbon offsets" for air travel, with travel agents and major corporations making available and supporting this extra expenditure in an attempt to minimize the impact of their flights. Consumers are paying attention.


The aviation industry eagerly awaits the in-service arrival of the Boeing 787 next year, advertised to be (at least) 20 percent more fuel efficient, and producing 20 percent fewer emissions than similarly sized aircraft. Airports, seeking to use resources more efficiently, already utilize many great sustainable "green" practices. Examples include use of electric tugs and alternative-fuel vehicles, people-mover systems and multi-modal access opportunities; pay-on-foot parking and water-use reduction energy-efficient lighting. Airports just aren't accustomed to tabulating or taking credit for such benefits. While these measures might not be world-changing, the incremental benefits still deserve appropriate attention and set the stage for even greater achievement.

Unfortunately, we are an industry that's easier to fault than applaud. We need to measure our progress and have it recognized. The United States Green Building Council (USGBC) pro-

vides guidance for new facilities through its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) accreditation program, and this framework may assist some airport managers in designing more efficient buildings. Boston Logan's Terminal A, which opened in 2005, became the first U.S. airport building to be LEED certified, and others will follow. Several industry-led movements such as those sponsored by AAAE, ACI, and TRB-ACRP are working to increase the dialogue on long-range initiatives, and to define tools we can all use to identify, evaluate, applaud and promote our green successes.

In addition to these efforts, more positive attention is deserved for airports that are pioneering sustainable approaches. A prime example is the City of Chicago's O'Hare Modernization Program. From implementing standards for recycling construction debris and including requirements for cleaner construction equipment in contracts to designing more efficient earthwork plans to mandating green roofs on new buildings (even utilitarian ones such as guard post canopies and electrical vaults), Chicago has written its own manual on sustainable airport design. The program's size and the municipality's progressiveness on this topic have allowed Chicago to devote its own resources to creating new methods for doing business smarter.

Five years ago the words "airport" and "sustainability" were not used in the same sentence. Imagine what our industry will be like in the future! At Boeing, and in Chicago, Boston, and elsewhere, we are already going green. To do more, airports may look both outside and inside the industry for examples of improving their total performance today—creatively reducing their environmental footprint while improving their overall life-cycle costs.

Ultimately, the key to a sustainable airport industry lies in numerous efficiencies that are comprehensively and consistently measured, reported and improved. 

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