

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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## Lambert airport ready for Phase II of renovation

BY [ken leiser](#)

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It has been called the front door to St. Louis.

So in an effort to improve the first impressions of visitors who walk through that door, officials at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport announced a major makeover in early 2007.

But more than three years later, the biggest renovation in the airport's history — at a cost of \$105 million — remains a major piece of unfinished business. Turbulence in the airline industry forced the airport to break the Airport Experience project into bite-sized chunks.

The first phase of work focused on the most pressing upgrades and is being wrapped up right now at a cost of \$20 million. Clunky baggage carousels were replaced on the ground floor of the Main Terminal. The dingy domed ceiling above the main ticket counters has been restored with a bright, white surface. And many of the directional road signs have been replaced.

"You have to have an airport that you can compete with both cosmetically and aesthetically," said Airport Director Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge. "The airlines don't want their customers, if their flight is delayed for five hours, to sit there and have nothing to do. The more your airport has to offer helps the airlines when they have off-schedule days."

Later this summer, the airport will embark on the next phase of work — a \$50 million interior renovation of the aging main terminal, and the A and C concourses.

The work will include:

- Replacing the hodgepodge of counters and terrazzo floors in the main ticketing lobby.
- Updating restrooms with new tile and fixtures.
- Improving the C concourse security-screening checkpoint.
- Brightening the cavernous lower level by removing the dark ceiling slats and adding recessed lighting.
- Incorporating art displays and a lower-level performance stage.

Lambert officials said the work would not only make the terminal more inviting, but would provide a boost to the beleaguered area job scene. The second wave of renovation work is expected to take about two years to complete and support about 150 skilled construction workers.

The improvements can't come soon enough for passengers who use the airport.

"It's dark and depressing down here" on the baggage-claim level, said Julie Kujawa of Mount Vernon, Ill., who was picking up family members returning from Orlando, Fla. "And there's not much down here. The walls are dark. The ceilings are low."

Amy and Don Palumbo of suburban Washington said they had flown into Lambert before and had always been struck by the low ceilings and the cramped feeling they induce on the lower level.

"Compared to other airports," Amy Palumbo added, "it's kind of old."

Gone from the original Airport Experience plan are the canvas awnings reaching from the Main Terminal to the hourly parking garage across the street. However, Hamm-Niebruegge said some projects could be

reconsidered, if needed, when the second phase of work was completed in the fall of 2012.

The project will be financed using bonds sold in June 2009, Hamm-Niebruegge said. "The bonds are long sold. So you have to move forward with the project. They were sold for that specific purpose. That decision is not a returnable decision."

Even if it were, she said, the airport would still move forward with it.

One reason is that there were as many airline seats in June from Lambert as there were one year ago, although there are fewer cities served by nonstop flights from Lambert. That is largely because most of the aircraft added to the Lambert mix are larger planes, and they are replacing mostly regional-jet flights that were axed by American.

Bonds will be repaid with airport revenue, said Hamm-Niebruegge.

The piecemeal approach reflects the gradual erosion in flights at Lambert.

Last month, American Airlines cut its daily flight schedule by more than half to 36 daily flights to nine cities. By comparison, there were 82 daily flights to 20 destinations in November.

Other airlines — most notably Southwest Airlines — have jumped in to fill part of the void. Southwest, which is now the dominant carrier in the St. Louis market, announced nine additional daily departures to six new nonstop destinations. Four of those cities that Southwest flies to — San Diego, Nashville, New Orleans and Raleigh-Durham, N.C. — would have been unreachable by nonstop flights after American's cuts. The two other cities — Los Angeles and Seattle — also will be served by competitors.

United Airlines and Delta Air Lines also have added flights.

Local business leaders have been clamoring for airport improvements since American Airlines made its first deep cuts to St. Louis flights in 2003. Airport staff and outside consultants began working on plans to improve

the Main Terminal — which is significantly older and darker than the East Terminal.

Richard Fleming, president and chief executive officer for the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association, said air service came up consistently when companies considered expansion or relocation to a community — and that included the perception and appearance of the airport itself.

"Obviously, in the environment of really tough times in the industry, the Lambert folks have had to be prudent in how they have modified the scope and timing of the improvements," Fleming said.