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American's departure from MacArthur brings national airline woes to LI



American Airlines has ended its regional service to Long Island MacArthur Airport. Credit: James Carbone

By Howard Fensterman

Guest essay

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If American Airlines had been honest in sending a “Dear John” letter to Long Island MacArthur Airport ending its regional service there, it would have acknowledged that “it’s not about you — it’s me.”

In truth, MacArthur has been doing everything right to attract regional carriers, from citing easy passenger access to gates to offering airlines lower costs in the lucrative Long Island market.

American's decision reflects a much broader, convulsive upheaval affecting every major commercial airline today. From skyrocketing fuel prices, to pilot shortages and equipment and engine supply-chain issues, every element of commercial aviation is under duress. Regional airports are among those paying the price.

MacArthur is fortunate it still has scheduled airline service. Many regional airports across the country have become ghost facilities. Williamsport Airport in Pennsylvania was totally dependent on American, and that airline pulled its plug last year. It's a national crisis. Nearly 20% of flights scheduled in 2019 were not operating in 2021, according to the Regional Airline Association.

Among the reasons: The cost of jet fuel has more than doubled in the past year, and the Ukraine war is likely to create additional spikes in months to come. Airlines are confronting the loss of some 5,000 pilots who have given up the "left seat," some because of the pandemic and some because many Vietnam-era pilots are retiring. Aviation analysts say captains and first officers still on the job know they can push for higher compensation.

Besides leaving airports like Long Island MacArthur with reduced service, these factors are forcing the closure of low-cost airlines that are an essential part of our nation's commercial aviation choices.

One U.S. Department of Transportation proposal to address this shortfall would have the federal government subsidize expensive training for those wishing to become commercial airline pilots who do not have a military aviation background. Another effort would allow those who left flying for personal reasons to return to the cockpit following extensive refresher courses. Aviation Week and Space Technology reports that 10,600 individuals with lapsed pilot's licenses participated in a program that reinstated those licenses following medical exams by FAA-authorized doctors.

These efforts will not bring American Airlines back to many airports it abandoned during this unprecedented era of turbulence, whose roots reside in the economic chaos that began when the airline industry was deregulated in 1978. Historic names like Pan Am and Eastern disappeared, and many carriers merged in shotgun marriages of survival. Lost in that decision to deregulate was the ability of the federal government to mandate regional airport service.

None of these dynamics is going to change. Nor is the location of Long Island MacArthur Airport in the heart of one of the most important air travel markets in the U.S. This is a wealthy region loath to travel to LaGuardia or Kennedy airports regardless of recent terminal improvements. Whether or not it builds a terminal on its north side, MacArthur is still minutes from a major train station with express access to Manhattan. And MacArthur has demonstrated that one does not need to torture passengers as part of the 21st century air travel experience.

How our nation's airlines recruit and train pilots needs to change to ensure Long Island, and similar regions across the country, have renewed access to safe, reliable, and affordable air travel. Think of it as an upgrade for America's current state of flying.

This guest essay reflects the views of Howard Fensterman, a Long Island attorney and managing partner at Abrams Fensterman.

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