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Reported by Pat Kelly

New airport recording record traffic



WEST BAY — The new Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport near West Bay continues to log record passenger numbers compared to the old airport in Panama City, which was officially closed to general aviation traffic on Sept. 30.

Airport Executive Director Randy Curtis said 67,967 total commercial passengers moved through the new airport in September compared to 24,850 passengers at the old airport in 2009, an increase of 173 percent.

“Passenger traffic continues to be very exceptional,” Curtis told the Airport Authority board recently. The new airport opened to commercial traffic on May 23.

The biggest boost to the September numbers was from Southwest Airlines, which did not operate at the old airport. Southwest recorded 17,925 outgoing passengers and 18,648 arriving passengers for September.

Delta Air Lines recorded a 25.5 percent increase in passengers for September 2010 over September 2009, 15,497 versus 12,503, according to figures Curtis supplied board members. This included passengers for both Delta and its regional carriers, Atlantic Southeast and Northwest Airlink.

The trend has continued since June, the first full month of the new airport’s operations, when total traffic, including passengers on both outbound and inbound planes, totaled 83,181, a 194 percent increase over the June numbers at the old airport.

The June totals outpaced numbers at both the Tallahassee Regional Airport and the Northwest Florida Regional Airport in Fort Walton Beach.

The high passenger traffic had led to complaints of inadequate parking that sparked plans by the airport board to expand current parking by 1,000 spaces, with an emphasis on long-term parking. The project is expected to be completed by Spring Break.

In addition, the St. Joe Co. expects to build a 300-space covered parking area near the entrance to the airport, also with an emphasis on overnight parking.

July numbers at the new airport were 83,168, a 173 percent increase over the old airport, with August passengers showing a 164.5 increase at 72,567. Total passengers year-to-date for the new airport through September showed an 84.5 percent increase over the old airport, or 448,650 passengers to 243,095.

“We are very pleased with the level of numbers we are seeing,” Curtis said.