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Airports pitch sites as all-purpose transport hubs

By Roger Yu

Some U.S. airports are waking up to the potential of some of their key assets: buses, cars and trains headed their way and acres of unused land.

They're starting to see themselves as all-purpose transportation centers — so-called intermodal hubs — where national, regional or metro rail, local buses, rental cars, taxis and shuttle operations are consolidated.

Some, such as those in Miami and Providence, are building them. Others are seriously considering it. The goal is to not only give travelers greater access to and from airport terminals, but to make the airport a central station where people go for a variety of choices in ground transportation.

Travelers, for instance, could take a local express bus or light rail to an airport, many of which are far from urban centers, for more than a flight. There, they could rent a car, or get regional or even national rail service to go somewhere else — without having to transfer to another station. And they could do it without having to drive and park their car in a far-flung lot. The same options exist when they land.

"It's a great idea," says Jeff Mayhew, a frequent traveler and a human resources director in Memphis. "It's about time we catch up. Parking is so expensive these days, and if you're stuck using a remote lot, you're likely riding a bus a couple of miles anyway."

When Mayhew lived in Brussels, he says, he used to hop on an airport express train from a station across the street from his apartment. The train dropped him off at a station directly under the terminal. "It would cost about 6 euros (\$7.75) round trip, vs. 20 euros (\$26) a day if I parked my car there," he says. "No hassle with traffic. One elevator ride, and I was at security."

Airports see practical reasons for turning themselves into public transportation centers. They can reduce pollution and traffic congestion around terminals. They also see dollar signs in building hubs. Some airport officials think they'll attract greater air service and open up another stream of non-aviation revenue from possible commercial development nearby.

"I think (such hubs) are truly the next logical wave of airport service," says Bill Hooper, an airport architect at architecture firm Gensler. "It's also a great opportunity for sustainability."

The airport industry is closely watching Miami International and Providence's T.F. Green airports' high-profile hub projects to see how successful they are. Other cities already have plans on drawing boards or are taking steps. San Diego, Phoenix and Los Angeles are, and Ohio transportation officials are seeking to create an intercity rail station near Cleveland Hopkins Airport. Some public transportation advocates in Tampa have called for building a train station at Tampa International Airport that would be used by high-speed rail and local light-rail trains.

Advocates of mass transit have talked about "intermodal hubs" at airports for decades without much action, despite several pieces of federal legislation that pushed for more public transportation. A majority of U.S. airports haven't had the funding, land, interest or political will to take on such massive projects.

But recent developments are starting to change the situation. Key among them is a push by many airports to extend local rail service to their terminals from the city center. A proposal to build a national high-speed rail network, which picked up steam when President Obama assigned \$10.5 billion for it, also envisions airports as crucial connection points.

Several cities are working on linking to their local metro or light-rail systems. Seattle-Tacoma opened a direct-rail connection to downtown last year. Others that have an approved rail project to be completed in the coming years include Dallas Love Field, Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Miami, Dallas/Fort Worth, Oakland, Denver, Washington Dulles and Los Angeles.

Direct-rail service would go a long way to establish credibility for airports that claim they're intermodal and offer passengers a variety of choices of ground transportation but really don't, says Patrick Sherry, professor and director of the University of Denver's National Center for Intermodal Transportation.

"Every airport is intermodal if a car can drive up to it," Sherry says. "Give us something new."

International competition is also starting to motivate U.S. airports into thinking about becoming ground-transportation hubs.

Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, where the country's high-speed rail is stationed directly under a terminal, is often mentioned as an ideal model.

Other cities — Cairo; Seoul; Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; Lisbon, Portugal— are also pursuing retail, commercial and logistical developments for their intermodal hubs, Hooper says.

"U.S. (airports) have been shortsighted, but they're now saying, 'This is my moment,' " he says.

More or less

Some airports are more intermodal than others. Newark Liberty's AirTrain, a monorail system, connects the terminals to a rail link station that serves Amtrak and New Jersey Transit commuter trains.

At Baltimore/Washington's BWI Rail Station, about a mile from the air terminals and reachable via free shuttle buses, travelers can catch Amtrak or local MARC commuter trains. Baltimore/Washington was the first U.S. airport to have a rail station on airport property. Light rail from Baltimore also comes directly to a stop at the terminal.

Travelers at Milwaukee can take a free shuttle to the Milwaukee Airport Railroad Station, an Amtrak station about a mile from the airport that connects to Chicago and downtown Milwaukee.

Many travelers say they look at access to mass transportation when choosing a destination airport.

"Rail connections are fantastic," says Kathie Nunley, an educational psychologist and founder of Brains.org, who travels frequently for business.

"They can't build them fast enough to suit me," she says. "Do I fly into Newark and (New York) JFK more than (New York) LaGuardia just because there is a direct train into the city? You betcha. Am I more apt to fly into San Francisco International now that you can take (local metrorail) BART right into the city? You better believe it."

Details on some new hub projects:

•**Miami.** State officials have discussed a transportation hub at Miami International since the 1980s, and began working on the \$1.7 billion project in the late 1990s.

Major roadway improvements have been mostly completed. A consolidated rental car center opened a week ago after three years of construction. A key component of the hub, the facility stores 6,500 cars and consolidates the fleets of shuttles run by rental companies.

The project also includes a train station and a people-mover rail system. The people-mover, which will open in 2013, would cut shuttle and bus trips by 30% to about 500,000 a year and "improve mobility in and out of the airport," says Gary Donn of Florida Department of Transportation.

A regional tri-county commuter rail and local metro trains will reach the Miami Central Station, scheduled to open in phases in 2013. It also has commitments from Amtrak, and will receive high-speed rail "if it ever gets down to the Miami area," Donn says.

The station will also house a ground transportation center for Greyhound, county buses and taxis.

•**Providence.** Dubbed InterLink, the \$267 million hub is scheduled to open in September and will consolidate the connection points of planes, trains, buses and rental cars.

The commuter rail operated by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which now ends at Providence, about 10 miles north of the airport, will be extended to the airport later this

year. It will allow travelers from Providence and Boston to ditch their cars to get to the airport. Amtrak is considering reaching the airport in the future.

The hub will also contain a six-story garage for rental cars, a building for rental car transactions, a bus stop and public parking. Elevated moving walkways will link the rental car building and the airport terminal.

Kevin Dillon, CEO of the Rhode Island Airport Corp., is betting that the hub will attract more air service because travelers want easy access to Boston. Foreign airlines, in particular, are intrigued by the idea since international tourists rely heavily on trains to get to Boston. "Transportation connectivity is going to be the key in the future," he says.

•**San Diego.** In an early plan still being discussed, officials at San Diego's Lindbergh Field have designed a station for the regional commuter rail and the local trolley to stop at the airport. They currently run past the site without stopping. The project also envisions future Amtrak and high-speed rail service.

To be located across the street from the airport, the hub would connect to the terminal via a walkway, moving sidewalk or a people-mover. A consolidated rental car garage, the first phase of the project, is scheduled to be completed by 2015, says Dan Levy of San Diego Association of Governments. The terminal building would also be relocated to be adjacent to the transportation hub.