



DOT Grant Splits Cost of Shared-use System By Nicole Nelson

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Project: Shared-use System
Airport: Fort Wayne (IN) Int'l Airport
Airport Authority: Fort Wayne Allen County Airport Authority
System: Shared Use Infrastructure Technology Environment (SUITE)
Contract Provider: AirIT
Information Technology Platform: Extended Airline System Environment (EASE)
Cost: \$425,019
Funding: 50% federal, 50% airport
Federal Source: DOT Small Community Air Service Development grant
Installation: Oct. 2011

A recently installed shared-use system at Fort Wayne International Airport (FWA) has all the markings of being a “sweet” deal for both the Indiana airport and its airline tenants.

The airport’s new Shared Use Infrastructure Technology Environment (SUITE) is expected to reduce costs for the airlines serving it by implementing shared-use ticket counters, gates, and the Extended Airline System Environment (EASE) information technology platform supplied by AirIT. In turn, lower operating costs make FWA an attractive destination for current and potential airline partners.

The project did, however, include a few preliminary sour notes, recalls Stephen Springer, information technology manager for Fort Wayne-Allen County Airport Authority. The airport had to tweak its original recipe to convince airlines to give shared use a try.

“Three years ago, we started investigating the standards and put together a specifica-



Stephen Springer

tion, but we kind of overdid it,” Springer acknowledges. The airport’s first specification, he explains, was much too complex and contained details delving into unwanted offerings. FWA’s initial attempt to adopt a more flexible operating environment consequently failed, with airline tenants voting down its first proposal due to confusion about common-vs. shared-use.

“It was disappointing, but it caused us to go back and figure out what we could do to make sure the airlines knew that this would be a benefit to them,” recalls Tory Richardson, executive director of airports with the Fort Wayne-Allen County Airport Authority.



Tory Richardson

Getting it Right

Over time, the airport fine-tuned its specification to get exactly what it, and the airlines, wanted.

According to Springer, the successful combination of the right specifications and finding

a fitting solution made AirIT’s EASE the obvious choice in the bidding process. Along with competitive pricing, AirIT’s product accommodates shared use beyond the Common-Use Passenger Processing Systems (CUPPS) initiative, he explains.

AirIT president and chief operating officer Chris Keller says that airlines traditionally shy away from the prospect of common use due to the technology and the limitations it often imposes on them.

“With CUPPS, most airlines would be required to develop an application to operate in that airport,” Keller explains. “That application comes at a very high cost to the airlines in terms of development and as a penalty in terms of operating within the business processes that they have in their own dedicated software.”

The goal at FWA was to facilitate shared use, with airlines operating in their own native dedicated environment, he clarifies.

Keller and his team enabled the airport to create a “virtual environment” that allows each airline tenant to operate within, and connect to, its own backend server system over network infrastructure provided by the airport. One of the biggest benefits from an information technology perspective is that

EASE takes very little airport resources to maintain because the airlines support and update their own applications, notes Keller. The primary benefit for the airport authority is flexibility and control over the equipment to attract more business and lower airline costs, he adds.

“EASE is a multi-sided platform that allows any airline to plug into that infrastructure and operate their own system and maintain their own functionality,” Keller explains. “You can’t do that with CUPPS.”

One More Time

According to Richardson, the airlines reviewed the original shared-use proposal with prejudice, thinking it was a common-use product.

“There was a lot of confusion among the airlines thinking that this was a common-use environment, and that isn’t necessarily viewed favorably by the airlines,” he explains. “We had a bit of an education and learning process to go through on both the airport and airline side to make sure we each understood what this project was and what we were going to accomplish with it.”

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Achieving mutual understanding that the proposed shared-use environment did not require airlines to reprogram their proprietary equipment and software was key, recalls Richardson. So was making sure the airlines knew that they could use the airport's network to access their own back office system with full functionality as if it were their own computers, ticket printers and boarding pass printers.

"They realized (shared use was) something that would not cost them money, but may actually reduce some of their operating costs because of the commonality," Richardson relates. "We think we can make some operational improvements and have cost reduction because it is common and it is truly a network. So if there is a situation where an airline needs to move into a different counter position, they can simply log on at the next location and take care of their passengers."

Operational flexibility, he notes, was a "key selling point."

Funding Surprise

The airlines' "aha moment" was further complemented by a positive development on the funding front. Half of the system's expense was offset with a Small Community Air Service Development (SCASD) grant. FWA's innovative use of a grant from the

Department of Transportation's SCASD branch for information technology upgrades is unprecedented, notes Richardson.

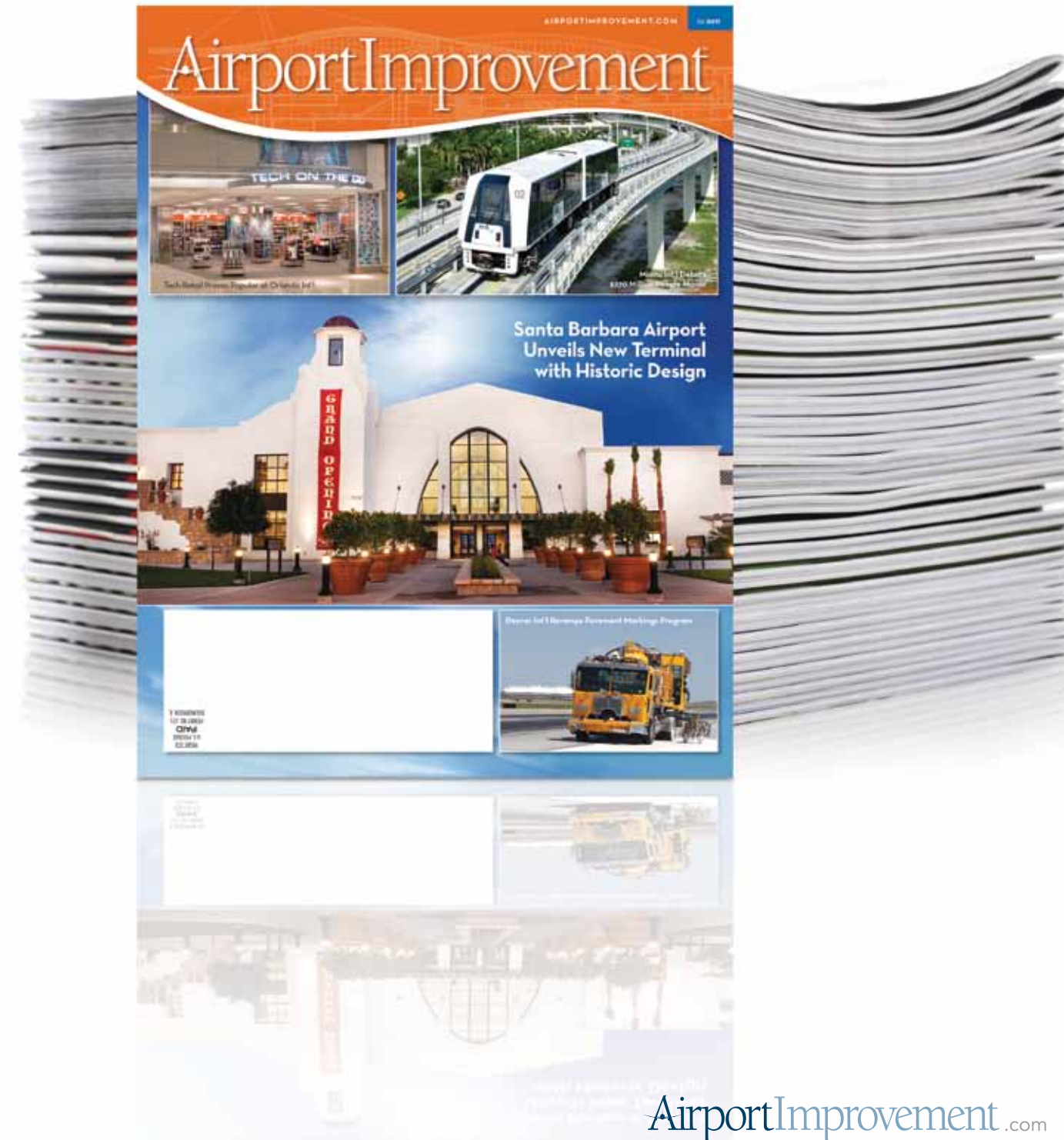
"When we looked at what we were trying to accomplish with the program, it really fit well with what the SCASD program is trying to accomplish in making smaller airports more in line with larger airports in terms of flight availability, flexibility and cost," he explains. "The DOT is interested in our project to see how it works out because it is the first time they have done something like this under the grant environment. It is too early to tell, but we are already realizing some of those benefits we thought would be in the project if we did it right."

According to Richardson, the airport's new shared-use environment gives FWA the "value-add" officials were seeking to encourage further air service development.

"The airlines realize and recognize there is value there and that we are trying to make things easier for them in accommodating their operations," Richardson relates. "We are on the forefront of being able to easily accommodate a new entrant while continuing to provide service and cost-effective solutions for the incumbent airlines. From that perspective, it bodes well for us and the airlines."

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