

Viewpoint

Could airport make Gary great again?

By Rob Hunden

There is a debate raging up north, and its outcome will affect the economic vitality of the entire Hoosier state for decades to come.



Hunden

It is a long-running debate that is populated by the captains of industry and political heavyweights. The contestants in the ring are Chicago and Peotone, Ill., and Gary, Ind. Milwaukee and Rockford are jockeying for Gary's position. Standing in the corners are the governors of Indiana and Illinois. In row one: a cadre of politicians from throughout the Midwest as

and did not want to recognize that our policies had supported the Shah's brutal regime for a generation. When Castro took over Cuba, we labeled him as the enemy because

in Northern Ireland, followed by increased security measures, did not bring peace.

The tragedies at Waco and Ruby Ridge should have taught us that

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well as the Bush administration. The prize: Chicago's third airport.

At issue is how to address the congested air traffic in the Chicago region that has forced gridlock and stunted economic growth not only in Chicago, but in secondary markets throughout the Midwest. Even as the tragic events of Sept. 11 have curtailed near-term business and leisure travel, long-term relief and investment remain an essential priority.

As early as 1968, Chicago's first Mayor Daley—Richard J.—suggested a third airport to meet the exploding demand. In the 33 years since, massive political capital has been expended by the city of Chicago in support of an expanded O'Hare. In contrast, a generation of political leaders in Springfield has marshaled resources to support a sprawling new international airport in Peotone, 40 miles south of Chicago off Interstate 57.

Despite the energy and effort, nothing has changed.

The city of Chicago and the city of Gary have formed an alliance during the struggle. Mayor Richard M. Daley knows that partnering with Gary's airport is a good strategy because Gary can act as Midway has, as a reliever airport for the region's air traffic, perhaps obviating the need for a brand-new massive international airport to compete with O'Hare.

There are numerous reasons why political forces in Indiana should do all they can to ensure the development of Gary-Chicago Airport (GCA), as it is now known. For a relatively small price tag, GCA could expand to handle more traffic than Midway Airport, which already boasts more traffic than Indianapolis International. It

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Corrections

■ CSO Architects Engineers & Interiors is the second-largest Indianapolis-area architectural firm as ranked by 2000 billings, according to the latest *IBJ* list. BSA Design Inc. is the city's largest firm. The rank was incorrect in a story last week.

■ The e-mail address for SBC Construction Inc. is sbconstruction@aol.com. The incorrect e-mail address appeared in last week's Small Business Profile. The company's Web site address is www.sbconstruction.com.

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is also 20 miles closer to the Loop than is Peotone and is centrally located to serve the 3 million people of northwest Indiana, south and east Chicagoland, and Michigan. And the economic benefits to the region and state are enormous.

Let's remember what made this state the economic powerhouse it was and is today: its central location and subsequent transportation network. If Indiana is going to go boldly forth in the high-tech age, it will be on the low-tech infrastructure of easy access and transportation through the state. That means we should be out front when it comes to the development of airports, high-speed rail and interstate travel.

Even if an expanded O'Hare or a new Peotone were approved today, it would be up to 10 years before the improvements would be completed. During that time, air traffic and the business it brings to the region will have shifted to other growing hubs like Denver, Minneapolis, Atlanta and Dallas. It also gives other Midwestern markets like St. Louis, Detroit and Milwaukee the time to expand their airports. Gary can expand much more quickly.

It's not as if Indiana would be entering uncharted territory in using the Gary airport to serve the larger Chicago market. Throughout the country, several airports have had tremendous success in capturing the economic riches of neighboring states or communities that failed to act boldly on transportation planning. Look at the successful models that exist: Baltimore-Washington Airport in the D.C. market-

place; Newark, Islip and White Plains in the New York market; and John Wayne/Orange County in the southern California market.

Why does it take the mayor of Chicago to say Gary's airport should be the third airport for the region or that rail links should be extended to the airport, so passengers can easily access the Loop from Gary? Shouldn't Indiana be doing the heavy lifting? As a state, Indiana has demonstrated little forward thinking when it comes to developing its transportation network compared with neighboring states.

Politically, the governor of Illinois has been a much stronger advocate for his state's interests than Indiana Gov. Frank O'Bannon has been for Gary. Indiana needs united and strong leadership on this issue. What's good for "da-region" is good for Indiana. The complete buildout

of GCA over five years will cost \$645 million (in 2000 dollars), compared with the \$4 billion to \$10 billion for either the O'Hare or Peotone schemes. The cost for GCA's first phase, which would expand critical elements and show that the state is serious, is a paltry \$65 million.

The state could and should get behind Gary-Chicago Airport now. Let us be bold politically and creative financially. Let us enable the creation of a world-class airport. In so doing, we will help solve a national air traffic problem, stabilize northwest Indiana, bolster state coffers and capture a market that has been going across the border for decades.

Hunden worked in economic development for the Indianapolis Bond Bank under former Mayor Stephen Goldsmith and is now a project director for C.H. Johnson Consulting Inc. in Chicago.

The Indianapolis Regional Economic Development Partnership

announced a new focus in 2000,
and unveiled its mission to targeted
businesses and media throughout the world: