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HCC in the News: Tampa International's billion-dollar update is a new airport experience

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TAMPA — At 2.6 million square feet, the new rental car center at Tampa International Airport is big — bigger, even, than International Plaza.

And it is just one of three airport projects scheduled to open to the public on Feb. 14. There's a 1.4-mile-long SkyConnect people mover (dubbed the #LoveTrain, since it will debut on Valentine's Day). And the main terminal will be emerging from three years of heavy construction.

In all, it's $971 million worth of work to de-congest the main terminal. Future phases of the expansion are aimed at creating an airport capable of handling 34 million passengers — compared to 19.6 million last year — within the current footprint.

"It's critical that we keep this airport up to date and support this kind of growth for the next 20 to 30 years," Hillsborough County Aviation Authority chair Robert Watkins said Wednesday during a sneak peek of the new construction.

So the experience of renting or dropping off a rental car at TIA is about to change.

For one thing, passengers will no longer walk out of the terminal across several lanes of dropoff and pickup traffic to get to a rental garage with a less-than-spacious lobby occupied by eight big rental companies.

Instead, they'll take the SkyConnect train from the terminal to the rental car center. There, they'll find 16 rental companies — those big eight, plus smaller ones, including Zipcar, that now operate off the airport's property. More companies, airport officials hope, will mean more competition and better choices for consumers.

The rental center has space for more than 5,300 vehicles at a time. It's also designed for high turnover, with the capacity to handle up to 1,500 rentals and 1,650 returns an hour. Behind the scenes, eight fuel tanks will hold a total of 200,000 gallons. It has 30 car-washing stations. And diverting rental cars to the new center will reduce traffic around the terminal itself.

Along with its sheer scale, the car rental center has some thoughtful touches.

On the way out, for example, there's a GPS pull-off area where visitors can pause safely and check or set directions to their destination before venturing onto Tampa Bay's highways.

And if departing passengers return their rental car — or if they park in the economy garage next door — and don't want to take their luggage on the train, they will be able to drop it off at a remote bag check inside the rental car center, as long they arrive at least 90 minutes before takeoff. Nearly all of the airport's domestic carriers are participating in the remote bag drop-off service.

The SkyConnect train — electric, rubber-tired cars made by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries America and developed with $194 million in state funding — will provide a faster, more dynamic ride than the airport's straight-line people movers to the airsides. Their route has some curves to it, and some up and down. The train can carry 2,700 passengers an hour. A typical trip is expected to take less than 5 minutes, with the next train coming along roughly every two minutes.

In partnership with the Audubon Society, Mitsubishi painted the outside of the trains with native Florida birds: white ibis, egrets, roseate spoonbills, pelicans. Through a separate partnership with Hillsborough Community College, its grads have been hired for Mitsubishi's operations and maintenance teams.

The terminal itself has gotten 55,000 square feet of new space — 23,000 of it coming in the form of new outdoor terraces for dining.

On top of that the terminal has gotten renovations to a space equivalent to more than four football fields. There's 114,000 square feet of new tile flooring, more than 1,000 linear feet of new escalators and updates to 24 elevators. Between the terminal and the airsides, the airport is bringing in nearly 70 new restaurants, shops and services, with a big emphasis on local names.

The art

Because some of the spaces are so big, the airport has commissioned public art so jumbo-sized that it won't get dwarfed by the space around it, like a dime on a chopping block:

• *Palimpsest*, a beaded tapestry some 70 feet long and 45 feet wide hangs in the rental car center next to the south escalators. Said Chicago-based artist Nick Cave, who created it in collaboration with Bob Faust: "It hangs as an energy field that both welcomes one home and wishes one well on their next journey."

• *Symbols, Systems & Proportions*, a hanging sculpture consisting of three curtains of 81 programmable light LED panels, each displaying a symbol or pictogram found at the airport (a plane, a telephone, an escalator). Artist Erwin Redl has a knack for sculptures that appear to change as people move around or past them. This is one is about 29 feet wide and 21 feet high. It's also in the rental car center, but near the north escalators.

• *Crosscurrents*, in the SkyConnect station at the rental car center. Look up. Overhead, Tim Prentice and David Colbert have created a 100-foot-long moving sculpture consisting of 10 clusters of reflective brushed aluminum plates suspended to turn in even the slightest currents of air. "The air around us moves in ways that are organic, whimsical and unpredictable," they said in a statement about the art. So, they add, if you turn the design over to the wind, the resulting piece of art should "take on these same qualities."

What's next

While this first phase of the airport's master plan was focused on reducing congestion in some of its public spaces, the next phase will seek to transform the airport as a business center.

To do that, the airport will develop 17 acres that's on the other side of the SkyConnect train station from the car rental center. For starters, there will be a 9-story office building connected to a neighboring hotel via a large atrium. The atrium, in turn, will be connected to the train station and rental car center via an enclosed elevated walkway.

The second phase also includes a second hotel, more stores and a gas station where passengers can top off rentals' gas tanks before they turn them in. And it will include moving the airport administrative offices out of the main terminal to make way for an expansion of curbside services for arriving and departing passengers.

A third phase includes building a new Airside D with 16 gates for domestic and international flights. Airport officials say the timing will be kept in tune with the growth in passenger volume and the demand for more or better facilities.

Airport CEO Joe Lopano said the expansion builds upon TIA's hub-and-spoke design — revolutionary when it opened in 1971 — that used the first airport people mover to carry passengers from a central terminal to their gates.

"This project is worthy of our history," he said, "and will be admired just as we admire the designs from the past."

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