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Committee of the Whole

Documenter name: Timothy Zelina

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Summary

- The Terminal Modernization Development Program (TMDP) will provide a significant overhaul of airport facilities when the program is complete -- though Bryant Francis, director of the Department of Port Control, warned the process could take several more years.
- The airport has numerous unfilled vacancies that are impacting operations, but they are not seeing applicants.
- The airport is experimenting with international/trans-Atlantic routes in its partnership with [Aer Lingus](#). While it is too early to make judgements on how well these are performing, it's a major expansion of the airport's access.

Follow-Up Questions

- What is the expected time frame of the TMDP? Estimates were vague and uncertain.
- There are plans to [expand facilities](#) at Burke Lakefront Airport, but some in the city have been eyeing closing and redeveloping it. Do these plans mean the department does not fear an impending closure?

Notes

Meeting called at 10:58 A.M.

This Cleveland City Council Committee of the Whole meeting was focused on the [Department of Port Control](#), which primarily operates Cleveland's two major airports, Cleveland-Hopkins and Burke Lakefront.

This is part of a series of discussions meant to inform council on the operations of the city's departments in preparation for budget meetings next year.

Bryant Francis, director of the Department of Port Control, and his team presented to

council:

Bryant Francis - *Director*

Christine Gilmartin - *Chief Financial Officer*

Dennis Kramer - *Assistant Director of Development*

No roll was called as there was no active legislation. In attendance were Transportation & Mobility Committee Chair Kerry McCormack, Ward 2 Council Member Kevin Bishop, Ward 4 Council Member Deborah Gray, Ward 14 Council Member Jasmin Santata, Ward 16 Council Member Brian Kazy and Ward 17 Council Member Charles J. Slife, all of whom are members of the Transportation & Mobility Committee.

Ward 11 Council Member Danny Kelly, was also in attendance but is not a member of that committee.

DEPARTMENTAL OVERVIEW

Reflection on Year 1: Francis joined the team during the resumption of air service to Europe, linking Cleveland to Dublin, Ireland.

Cleveland has become a “focus city” for [Frontier Airlines](#), meaning it is a city prioritized by Frontier Airlines for maximizing access and service.

The department faced unexpected resignations. Gilmartin and Kramer filled in while the department sought new candidates. Francis said he is interested in diversifying his team in terms of race, gender and age.

“I think the real opportunity is with the youth, turning them on to all that the business of airports has to offer,” he said.

He also prioritized employee retention and more competitive hiring practices, hoping to improve morale and better advertise positions to prospective applicants. He expressed concern that the airport is offering below industry standard salaries and benefits, particularly compared to other airports.

“In many instances we do not compare well to other airports, including some that are smaller. So we lose candidates at step one, meaning they don’t even apply,” Francis said.

Highlights

Francis moved to present a report highlighting his team's accomplishments and noting what still needs improvement.

"I ask you to give us a bit of grace today, not a pass, but a bit of grace," he said, saying he and his team may not have answers to all the questions.

"There is much that is going well, yet some aspects of our operation need improvement or greater emphasis," Francis said.

He said the customer-facing facilities are aging and lacking in capacity. Some airline partners have improved gate areas with new carpeting and facilities as part of the "Terminal Modernization Program."

Francis discussed the structure of the executive team and the demographics of the department's workforce. Current employees are 75% male and only 25% female, reflecting a male-dominated workforce. He also discussed position vacancies, noting custodial staff had a lot of vacancies. But he said most of this was due to an expansion of positions that are yet to be filled.

Burke Lakefront

The report moved to discuss [Burke Lakefront Airport](#).

"Things are looking really good at Burke these days, actually," Francis said. He said he believes his team is more focused on supporting Burke now than in the past.

In Spring 2024, the airport expanded its access to numerous new airports, some seasonal, some year-round. In total 520 flights were added with a seat capacity of 121,940.

Cleveland passenger arriving/departing numbers at both airports have recovered from the pandemic and actually outpaced 2019 numbers by about 200,000, with 10.25 million arriving or departing in 2024 versus 10.04 million arriving or departing in 2019. However, Q4 2024 seat numbers are down 9% compared to Q4 2023. Francis said this is due to service reduction by Spirit Airlines, which has been struggling and filed for bankruptcy Nov. 18.

Finance

Christine Gilmartin then took control of the presentation to speak on the finances of the department.

The proposed 2025 budget is about \$6 million more than the 2024 adopted budget. The largest proposed increases are towards contractual services (+\$3 million) and maintenance (+\$2.7 million).

Concerning the Lease and Concessions Department: in 2024 they directed the Frontier Airlines space expansion, adding about 9,000 square feet of new facility space for Frontier Airlines operations. In 2025, the department plans to implement new Airport Concessions agreements to develop and renovate retail/food services within the airport.

Public Safety

Dennis Kramer then took over the presentation to discuss public safety operations.

He reports his inspection of the Airport Public Safety department. The [Transportation Security Administration \(TSA\)](#) noted no major security or compliance concerns. The department improved its Airport Worker Screening program as encouraged by regulators and cooperated in active shooter, human trafficking and emergency evacuation training programs. The airport firefighting unit also passed inspections and updated its equipment.

Looking towards 2025, the department hopes to upgrade security technologies and replace the fence line that keeps wildlife out of the airport.

Field Maintenance, Airport Operations and Vehicle Maintenance

Gilmartin again took control of the presentation to speak on these three teams.

The Field Maintenance team's main 2024 accomplishment was installing guardrail to reinforce the airport's perimeter fence and upgraded the airport's field maintenance facility.

Airport Operations installed an airport lightning detection/warning system and began installing a bird netting replacement project. They hope to continue to have 0 findings in the 2024 FAA's annual inspection.

Vehicle Maintenance updated its fleet by removing obsolete equipment. Next year its plans include developing a process for disposing of outdated equipment.

“It may not sound like a big job, but it is,” Gilmartin said.

Terminal Operations, Building Maintenance and Custodial Maintenance

Kramer took over the presentation to speak on these three teams.

The Terminal Operations team redesigned checkpoint queues for more efficient passenger flow and established secondary queueing to decongest the ticketing lobby.

The Building Maintenance team replaced HVAC/heating equipment, installed new flooring, and updated lighting within the airport. Next year some of their plans include renovating Building 214, continued HVAC renovations, and upgrading taxiway lighting. Building 214 was previously occupied by United Airlines but will be transitioned into a space for internal airport functions.

Custodial maintenance improved restroom facilities, purchased new scrubbing equipment and is exploring new custodial technologies. In 2025 it hopes to increase employee engagement, develop staff and continue its role in airport maintenance.

Information Technologies, Airport Strategys and Harbors

Kramer continued the presentation on these three teams.

Information Technologies’ 2024 accomplishments include instituting standardized passenger processing systems under “Common Use,” improving airport phone systems, and increasing cybersecurity efforts. In 2025, they hope to standardize Gate Management systems under “Common Use”. “Common Use” are kiosks that passengers can use to check in without needing staff.

For Airport Strategies and Harbors, some of 2024’s accomplishments include instituting a parking reservation system where parking spots can be reserved online. In 2025, plans include continuing a North Coast Harbor renovation plan.

Kramer continued the report with a brief overview of four additional teams: Airport Planning, Airport Compliance & Inclusion, Airport Engineering & Construction and Airport

Environmental & Sustainability. There were no major changes in these departments in 2024.

Terminal Modernization Development Program

Kramer continued with a discussion of the Terminal Modernization Development Program (TMDP). The master plan for this program was developed in 2021.

Major areas of improvement are:

- Increase **Ticketing/Check-in Space** from 7,700 square feet to 11,200 square feet, as the existing space is too narrow and lacks depth.
- Increase **Checked Baggage Inspection Systems** from 11,200 square feet to 19,500 square feet, adding two additional explosive detection systems and up to 14 checked baggage resolution areas.
- Consolidate **Security Screening Checkpoints**, increasing total space from 21,200 square feet to 43,000 square feet.
- Increase **Gate Waiting Area** space, from 101,200 square feet to 163,500 square feet, as holdrooms are currently undersized for projected demand.
- Add **Gates**, raising existing number from 45 to 53 gates to accommodate future passenger and aircraft operation growth.

[Paslay Group](#) was hired in fall 2023 as a consultant for managing the program.

Additional projects are adding more walkable spaces, more parking spaces, a new rental car facility that is walkable from the terminal, and a new configured roadway system to optimize traffic flow. The team also hopes to add concessions, modernize and expand restrooms, and provide direct access to “Landside” so passengers don’t need to be rescreened by TSA to access. “Landside” refers to the parts of the airport accessible to the public.

Director Francis said the bathroom expansions are delayed; one set should be completed soon, but progress on additional sets is being delayed until after the high travel dates of Thanksgiving.

Council questions

Kerry McCormack, chair of the Transportation and Mobility Committee, asked if the improvement is a collective process or phases. Francis said they think of it as a collective

progress but break it down into components that are targeted individually. “[It] sort of will be like renovating and expanding our house while we are living in it,” Francis said.

McCormack asked them to include “average travelers” in that work. He said he was recently at an airport where renovations had made the airport confusing. “It looked like it was designed for aviation nerds and not the average passenger,” he said, complaining the signage was confusing in a brand new facility.

Kramer said they are aware of this issue, that a signage consultant had even directly told the executive team that none of them are qualified to judge the signage in their departments – they know it too well!

McCormack said there is a disconnect in Cleveland between citizens seeking work and the fact that many government departments like the airport have unfilled positions. He asked how they can better communicate these vacancies.

Francis said they are engaging with HR on how and where to advertise, noting there are communities “not engaged” with the airport. He said he’s open to forwarding those opportunities to council members to push out to constituents. McCormack said the council members all have newsletters and he would be open to posting job opportunities on his.

McCormack asked how the Spirit Airlines bankruptcy will impact Cleveland. Spirit announced it [will be seeking Chapter 11 bankruptcy](#) in mid-November.

Francis said they began to reduce their footprint in Cleveland a year ago and that the impact will be minimal.

McCormack asked about the baggage carousel, saying that one carousel had three separate airlines on it and this clogged up the area. Francis said this is handled by airlines internally or the airlines contract it out – it is not an airport function.

Council Member Slife said he is surprised that the airport ranks so low on customer satisfaction as he said other airports treat people “like cattle.” He also expressed frustration that some airport employees are rude, saying that this reflects poorly on the city. Francis said that while they seek to improve customer service, many of the people passengers interact with are employees of TSA, concessions or the airlines. He said if his team can develop good processes, it can trickle down to these third parties. McCormack asked if they can request funding from TSA if they’re training their people. “Likely not,”

Francis said.

Slife asked if Cleveland might be a viable location for trans-Atlantic routes. Francis said the existence and longevity of the Aer Lingus (Cleveland-Dublin) service will provide evidence for whether this is the case. Francis said he believes seeing growth in this service would be a sign that further investment would be warranted.

Council Member Danny Kelly suggested meeting with trade unions for insights on filling staffing deficiencies.

Council Member Deborah Gray asked what will replace the Sheraton Hotel. Francis said the goal is to replace that site with public parking.

And with that, the meeting is adjourned!

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