

2001-2002 SANTA CLARA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

REVIEW OF CUSTOMER SERVICE AT THE NORMAN Y. MINETA SAN JOSE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

ABSTRACT

The function of a passenger airport is to facilitate the movement of travelers from one destination to another in a timely and efficient manner. The terrorist attack against the United States on September 11, 2001, triggered the implementation of federal regulations that have dramatically altered the way airports conduct business. It is not the duty of a county grand jury to pass judgment on these federal regulations; however, the 2001-2002 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury did review certain customer service aspects of the Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport. The authority to conduct the review is found in Section 925a of the California Penal Code.

During a six-month period, the Grand Jury visited the airport on three occasions, interviewed middle- and upper-level management and reviewed appropriate documents. The Grand Jury found that some customer service issues existed prior to September 11, 2001, and others have arisen since.

The Grand Jury made five recommendations to airport management to address the need for improvement in the following four areas:

- Traffic and passenger directional and informational signs outside and inside the terminals
- Passenger lines, wait times and crowded conditions, particularly in Terminal A
- Accessibility of information services

- Wheelchairs for physically handicapped travelers

INTRODUCTION

The 2001-2002 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury evaluated the operations of the Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport (airport) to determine if the public is being well served under current high-security conditions. The events of September 11, 2001, changed the way airports in the United States operate. The terrorist attack and its impact on the traveling public at the San Jose airport prompted the Grand Jury to undertake this review. The Grand Jury decided to evaluate the ability of the San Jose airport to continue providing appropriate services for its customers while responding to the new federal security regulations.

This review lasted from November 2001 through April 2002. The authority for the Grand Jury to conduct its review is found in Penal Code Section 925a.

BACKGROUND

The Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport is located two miles north of downtown San Jose. The airport began operations in 1946 when a group of local businessmen built a 1,900-foot runway on land leased from the City of San Jose. The city assumed ownership and operation of the airport in 1948 and the airport is currently operated completely as a self-supporting enterprise.

Since the first modern terminal building (now Terminal C) was completed in 1965,

with capacity to handle 124,000 passengers annually, the airport has had numerous expansions as it has grown to the current 13.1 million passengers during the last year. Thirteen major airlines average a total 388 flight departures and landings daily. Currently, the two terminal buildings have approximately 400 thousand square feet and 31 aircraft boarding gates. Parking capacity is approximately 7,600 vehicles.

In 1984, the airport was renamed San Jose International Airport with the addition of service to Canada. In November 2001, the airport was renamed in honor of Norman Y. Mineta, the current U.S. Secretary of Transportation and the former mayor of San Jose.

As part of the city's master plan, San Jose City Council has approved an expansion of Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport to include a new terminal (Terminal B); this expansion will increase the total number of gates to 40. As yet, it is unclear how the events of September 11 and the subsequent heightened security regulations will affect the design and implementation of that plan.

Scope of the Review

In August 2001, the Grand Jury scheduled a September 14 tour of the airport as a routine part of its duty to act as an oversight body of public agencies in the county. The terrorist attack of September 11 caused that tour to be cancelled; it was rescheduled for November 9.

During the November tour, the Grand Jury witnessed visible police patrols, the presence of the National Guard, long lines and extremely crowded terminals. In Terminal A, the lines of ticketed passengers extended out of the check-in area, into the hallways, up and down stairways, and into the short-term parking garage. As a result of what it had seen, the Grand Jury initiated its review.

Over the course of its review, the Grand Jury toured the airport, conducted two unannounced inspections of the terminals and the long- and short-term parking areas, and toured the perimeter and roadways of the airport to view the entrances and exits. Jurors met with and interviewed more than a dozen airport administrators, including the director of aviation, two deputy directors, marketing and customer service personnel, the director of security, a parking supervisor and the ombudsman. In addition, the Grand Jury reviewed a customer service video tape and various documents provided by the airport.

On November 27, 2001, U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta said, "We will strive to develop a screening process that prohibits weapons or other banned materials in airport sterile zones without requiring a wait of longer than ten minutes at any security checkpoint for passengers using United States airports." Like others across the country, San Jose's airport is challenged to consistently meet this 10-minute goal. Many new procedures have been phased in, modified and phased out. The airport has had to react to all of these changes. During the six months the Grand Jury conducted its review, the following changes occurred:

- The National Guard patrolled the terminals at the time of the Grand Jury review; San Jose Police are scheduled to cover many of the patrol duties beginning in May 2002 to fill the gap until the new federal employees are in place.
- Vehicles entering the short-term parking lots were subject to search early in the Grand Jury review period. That requirement was later eliminated.
- Federal guidelines have stipulated that the short-term parking garage would need to be torn down because it is within 300

feet of Terminal A. It was later determined the garage may be retrofitted instead.

- Curbside passenger check-in and baggage handling were discontinued, adding to longer lines within the terminals. Curbside check-in has since been reestablished.

The Grand Jury recognizes that airport management has a daunting task in responding to all of the new and constantly changing conditions. Because of the shifting nature of the situation, it is difficult to undertake a comprehensive review at this time. Accordingly, the Grand Jury limited its review to the following aspects of customer service at the airport:

- Ingress and egress
- Customer services in Terminals A and C
- Complaint procedures

Ingress and Egress

There are two main vehicle entrances and exits at the airport: Airport Parkway off of Guadalupe Parkway, and Airport Boulevard off of Coleman Avenue. There is a third entrance leading directly into the long-term parking lot from Martin Avenue. Passenger drop off and pick up is available at that location as well. From the long-term parking lot, shuttle buses run every five to 15 minutes to transport customers to Terminals A and C.

There is a short-term parking lot next to Terminal C and a short term parking garage adjacent to Terminal A. Cars may stop at the curbside of the terminals only long enough to drop off or pick up passengers. Curbside waiting is not allowed, and San Jose Police officers are on hand to ensure that it does not occur.

Customer Services in Terminals A and C

The two terminals were built at different times and with different designs. Terminal A serves American Airlines and Southwest Airlines while Terminal C serves all other airlines. American and Southwest are two of the highest volume carriers in San Jose. Airport administration has stated that consideration is being given to moving one of those airlines to Terminal C.

The Impact of Screening

New security related procedures have caused a number of customer service problems at the airport. In the short-term parking areas and inside the terminals, the signs directing passengers to various parts of the airport apparently have not kept pace with the recent changes. Security checkpoints have been established in both terminals and only ticketed passengers and approved escorts for minors or the disabled may go beyond those checkpoints.

Passengers and their belongings are now subject to more rigorous screening by metal detectors, electronic scanning machines and physical searches. These procedures have raised a number of privacy issues and comfort issues. The airport and airlines are responding to some of these issues by providing privacy screens, same-gender physical searchers and even lending shoe horns to travelers required to remove their shoes for security reasons.

Seating is not provided for passengers waiting in long lines caused by the additional screening and other security procedures. During busy travel times, when lines are particularly long, this situation poses a difficulty for travelers who have difficulty standing for any length of time.

Airport administration has expressed concerns to the Grand Jury about the expected arrival this summer of approximately 600 federal employees who

will take over the duties of the current 300 contract employees at the security checkpoints. This will increase total airport site employees by 43 percent, from the current 700 to 1000. The federal employees will be primarily focused on security, and the impact on customer service is difficult to predict. The administration expressed apprehension about the stress this sudden growth will put on the airport infrastructure. The airport may need to provide areas for parking, meeting and training rooms, staff break rooms, and restroom facilities. Any of these additions will require space that is currently being used for direct service to airport customers.

Information Services

Within the terminals, the airport uses an Ambassador Program and white courtesy telephones located throughout both terminals to provide information and assistance. The Ambassadors, who wear bright orange vests for visibility, direct passenger flow, answer questions and assist people in finding the correct lines. Airport employees are encouraged to devote some of their on-duty time to this program.

There is one information booth in each terminal located close to the baggage claim areas. These booths are staffed by community volunteers who supply information about the local area. This service is most appropriate and accessible for visitors departing the airport.

Special Assistance

Passengers with physical disabilities may request assistance through the airlines. In the past, wheelchairs have been provided by one airline in each terminal and that airline has lent the wheelchairs to other airlines. According to airport personnel, the wheelchairs have not always been properly maintained. In some cases the chairs have been unavailable because the airline that owned them had locked them away at the end

of the day. Airport personnel stated they are working with the airlines to develop a uniform policy for leasing and servicing wheelchairs.

Food Services in the Terminals

For economic reasons, the airlines have reduced or eliminated much of the food and beverage service on flights. Passenger options for purchasing food at the airport are limited. For many gates in Terminal C, there are food and retail services available on either side of the security checkpoints. In Terminal A the only food service outside the secure area consists of a small bank of vending machines near baggage claim. Deli/restaurant services are only available to ticketed passengers after they have cleared security.

Complaint Procedures

Complaints about the airport or airlines may be made to the airport customer service department, which accepts them by letter, email, telephone, fax or in person. Airport personnel stated that all complaints are logged, tracked and followed up by an airport employee, even if the complaint involves an airline or other company. Until about two years ago the logging and tracking information was contained in a three-ring binder. Currently, the system consists of a computer-based spreadsheet and a hard copy filing system (filing cabinets).

Airport procedures require that every complaint be categorized by type. Airport personnel attempt to respond and these response actions are logged as well. The airport tracks complaints by number and type on a month-to-month basis, and this provides comparative data on customer service efforts. Administration uses this information both internally to improve customer service and in monthly meetings between airport and airline administrators.

Airport procedures also call for monthly walk-around inspections of the airport facilities by airport personnel. During the inspections, data from the complaint tracking system may be used to identify and correct customer service issues.

FACTS

1. The airport has implemented a number of security related procedures since September 11, 2001. These procedures have been subject to frequent change due to federal security mandates. Many of the new procedures have negatively impacted traveler convenience and comfort.
2. Airport personnel have attempted to mitigate some of the service issues resulting from the security policies and procedures implemented since September 11, 2001.
3. The Martin Avenue entrance to long-term parking is located on a small street that is not well known by the general public.
4. Directional signs to the Martin Avenue entrance are small and not easily seen. Some are obscured by overgrown foliage.
5. At a busy merging point on the route between Terminals A and C, there are no apparent “merging traffic” signs.
6. There is only one small handicapped parking sign at the entrance of the Terminal A parking garage. This sign can only be seen from within about 50 feet of the garage entrance.
7. There are no clearly visible signs indicating the direction to the elevator or the entrance to Terminal A in the attached parking garage.
8. At times, both terminals are crowded and subject to long passenger lines.
9. In Terminal A, all foot traffic funnels through two narrow passageways.
10. Sluggish passenger flow in Terminal A is exacerbated by placement of two high volume airlines in that facility.
11. The airport provides information to customers in different ways, including newsletters, a website, telephone information lines and courtesy telephones in the terminals. Some of these are most easily accessed from off-site locations.
12. The white courtesy telephones are hung low on the wall for accessibility from wheelchairs. They are identified by small black and white signs posted just above the telephones.
13. The Ambassador Program is an effort to provide passenger service in front of and inside the terminals. The program uses airport employees who take time from their normal duties to staff the program.
14. The Grand Jury observed that Ambassadors are not always present during busy travel times.
15. Wheelchairs are provided by individual airlines, rather than the airport. One airline in each terminal has taken this responsibility and lends wheelchairs to the other airline(s) as needed.
16. Airport officials told the Grand Jury that there have been times when wheelchairs were not available, and, in most cases, the chairs have been poorly maintained.

17. The airport has a process for logging, tracking and resolving complaints. The data is entered into a computer-based spreadsheet program. Compiled data must then be manually extracted for use in preparing reports.
18. The airport produces a monthly report that details the type and number of complaints received. Month-to-month and year-to-year comparisons are made. Among the types of complaints noted are: handicapped concerns, airport design, traffic and roadways, parking, security and signage.
19. The Grand Jury was informed by airport administration that airport personnel, including managers, customer service representatives and facilities workers, conduct monthly walk-around inspections of the grounds and facilities. Complaint information is available for use during these inspections.
5. In Terminal A, long lines can lead to customer frustration and dissatisfaction. This situation is exacerbated by the juxtaposition of two high volume airlines.
6. The Ambassador Program as currently implemented is mostly ineffective. The program could be improved by increasing the number of Ambassadors on duty during busy travel times.
7. Courtesy phones, while widely dispersed throughout both terminals, are sometimes difficult to locate. People walking or standing in front of the devices can easily block the phones from view.
8. Disabled travelers are inconvenienced when wheelchairs are not available or are not working properly.
9. Reports from the complaint logging and tracking system are being used to identify and improve customer service issues.

FINDINGS

The 2001-2002 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury finds:

1. The Martin Avenue entrance to long-term parking is difficult to find. Directional signs to this entrance are inadequate.
2. It is difficult to determine from directional signs that handicapped parking exists in the Terminal A parking garage.
3. Due to a lack of signs, it is difficult to find the elevators and entrance to Terminal A from the parking garage.
4. The lack of road signs along the busy airport roadways between terminals causes a confusing and unsafe situation.

10. The computer-based spreadsheet system of storing complaint data does not allow for sophisticated reports to be easily generated. The time consuming process of manually extracting data for monthly reports could be improved upon by implementing a different tracking system.

CONCLUSIONS

Many elements of customer service at San Jose's airport have been affected by September 11. City officials and airport management are working hard to effectively deal with those issues and still maintain progress toward the goals detailed in the city's master plan, including the renovation of the airport with the construction of Terminal B.

Near the end of its review, the Grand Jury became aware of a presentation by airport management to the 2002 Silicon Valley Blue Ribbon Task Force On Aviation Security And Technology entitled Impacts Of The Transportation Security Act (ATSA), dated April 17, 2002. This report dealt with the proposed terminal building and the construction changes and increased costs that will result from the new federal safety regulations. The director of aviation for the city has also voiced his concerns to the Grand Jury regarding the number of passenger gates proposed for the renovated airport.

There was not sufficient time to fully review all of this information, but the Grand Jury believes it is vital for the airport to continue providing comprehensive information to the blue ribbon task force, the city, and the public regarding the security, cost, and customer service issues that will affect the construction of the airport for the eleventh largest city in the United States.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the San Jose City Manager:

1. Improve the effectiveness of signage on the perimeter of the airport, in the parking and roadway areas, and within the garage. Suggestions include:
 - a. Increase the quantity of directional signs
 - b. Increase the size of signs to make them more readable
 - c. Improve placement of signs so that they can be read from all expected approaches
 - d. Trim foliage and remove other obstructions that may obscure signs

e. Add or improve lighting where appropriate

(Ref. Findings #1, 2, 3 & 4)

2. Create a more equitable balance of passenger traffic between Terminals A and C. (Ref. Finding #5)
3. Expand the Ambassador Program to assure sufficient coverage during heavy travel times. (Ref. Finding #6)
4. Create more visible indicators to assist customers in locating white courtesy telephones within the terminals. (Ref. Finding #7)
5. Assure a uniform and consistent system for the availability and maintenance of wheelchairs. (Ref. Finding #8)

PASSED and **ADOPTED** by the Santa Clara
County Civil Grand Jury this 28th day of May
2002.

Bruce E. Capron
Foreperson

Norman N. Abrahams, DDS
Foreperson Pro Tem

Joyce S. Byrne
Secretary