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Inside look at the \$8B project to turn LaGuardia into a 'world class' airport



COREY SIPKIN



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EXCLUSIVE

LAGUARDIA AIRPORT RE-IMAGINED

An inside look at \$8 billion project meant to transform facility into 'world class' hub

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Flying in and out of LaGuardia Airport can be maddening for New York passengers — from the moment they pull off the Grand Central Parkway until they take off, or when they touch down on the runway on an inbound flight.

Passengers have had to deal with tangled, clogged roadways leading to and from the airport in northern Queens as well as cramped taxiways and antiquated terminals, all adding up to potential delays. But for the past five years, work has been underway to transform the airport from “Third World” — as it’s infamously been dubbed — to what project officials say will be “world class.”

The \$8 billion effort includes a streamlined road network, new terminals with modern amenities, plentiful dining and shopping options, and extra space for planes to stay out of each others’ way.

Even as the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the air travel industry, the two main builders — LaGuardia Gateway Partners and Delta — have made significant progress, unveiling what Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has called the airport’s biggest milestone to date, a

new Arrivals and Departures Hall at Terminal B.

The project, largely funded by private dollars, is expected to be completed by 2025. Despite a wish list of upgrades at the 80-year-old airport, serious concerns remain — such as the overhaul’s failure to address constrained runways and the practicality of a rail link anticipated to cost another \$2.5 billion. The proposed LaGuardia AirTrain is also threatened by a projected \$3 billion in pandemic-related revenue losses, according to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which runs the airport.



NOW ONLINE
Reporter Alfonso Castillo takes you on a video tour of LaGuardia Airport at newsday.com/lga

Here’s a look at some of LaGuardia’s long-standing problems, how the project aims to address them, and some issues that could arise.

THE PROBLEM: Flight delays

Although LaGuardia carries fewer passengers than 20 other major U.S. airports, it typically ranks among the top three for flight delays. One key reason for the tardy take-offs: a tight taxiway that results in congestion. The cramped quarters are reflective of the airport’s antiquated design. When it opened in 1964, the airport’s central terminal was designed to handle about 8 million people annually. These days, about 30 million people fly in or out of LaGuardia in a typical year.

The solution: Create more space for planes.

In addition to consolidating the hodgepodge of buildings at LaGuardia into one streamlined and unified structure, the redevelopment project shifts the airport’s footprint 600 feet closer to the Grand Central Parkway — freeing up two more miles of taxiway and creating new lanes for planes to park without blocking other aircraft. New elevated walkways, leading from terminals’ central



A rendering of the completed project. The airport’s footprint is



A remodeled section of Terminal B at LaGuardia on Thursday. The whole terminal is expected to be completed by 2022.

ticketing and security and baggage claim areas to gates, will be high enough for planes to taxi underneath.

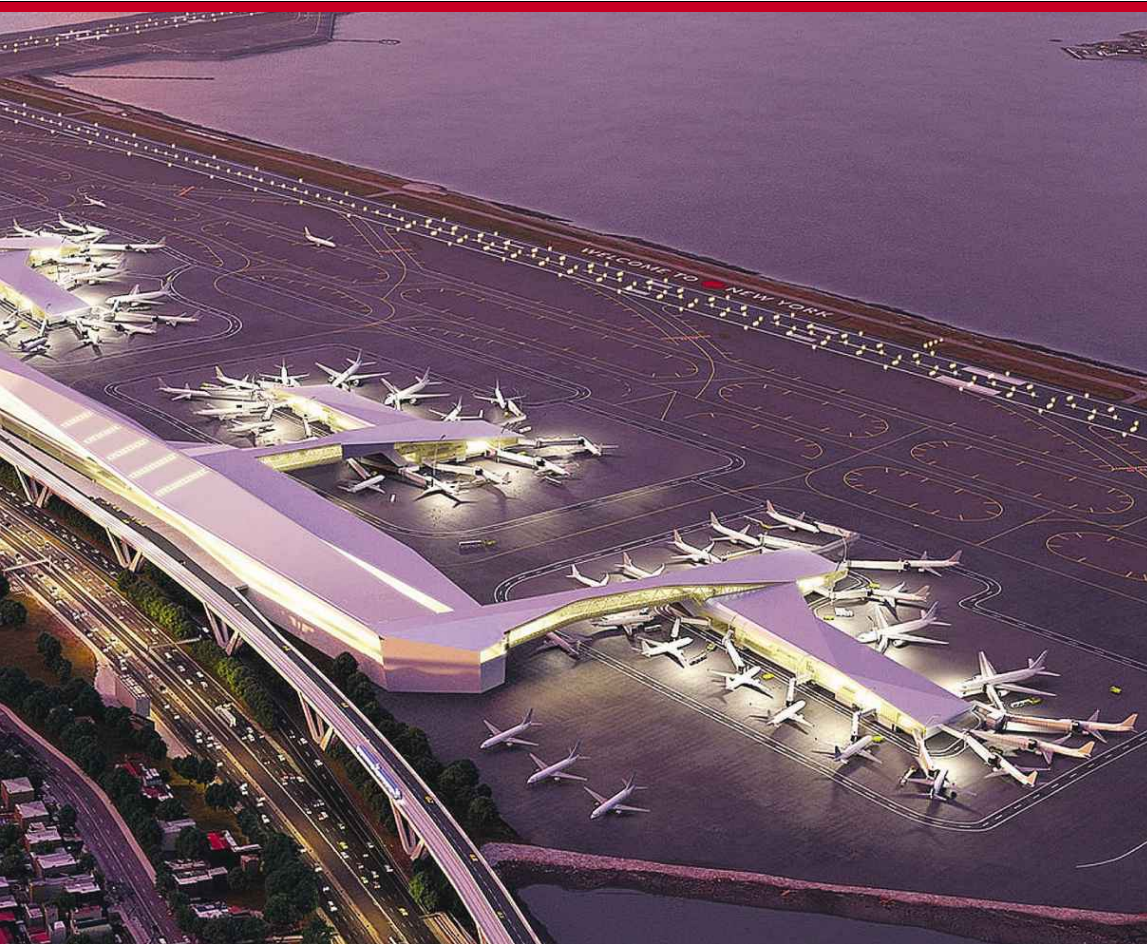
When you’ll see it:

The first several gates in the rebuilt Terminals B and C opened in December 2018 and October 2019, respectively. Other new structures have gradually come on line since — the largest of which was a new Arrival and Departures Hall referred to as the Terminal B “headhouse.” The new Terminal B complex is expected to be completed by

2022, and the new Terminal C by 2025. But all the additional taxiway space won’t become available until the old terminals and other structures are demolished.

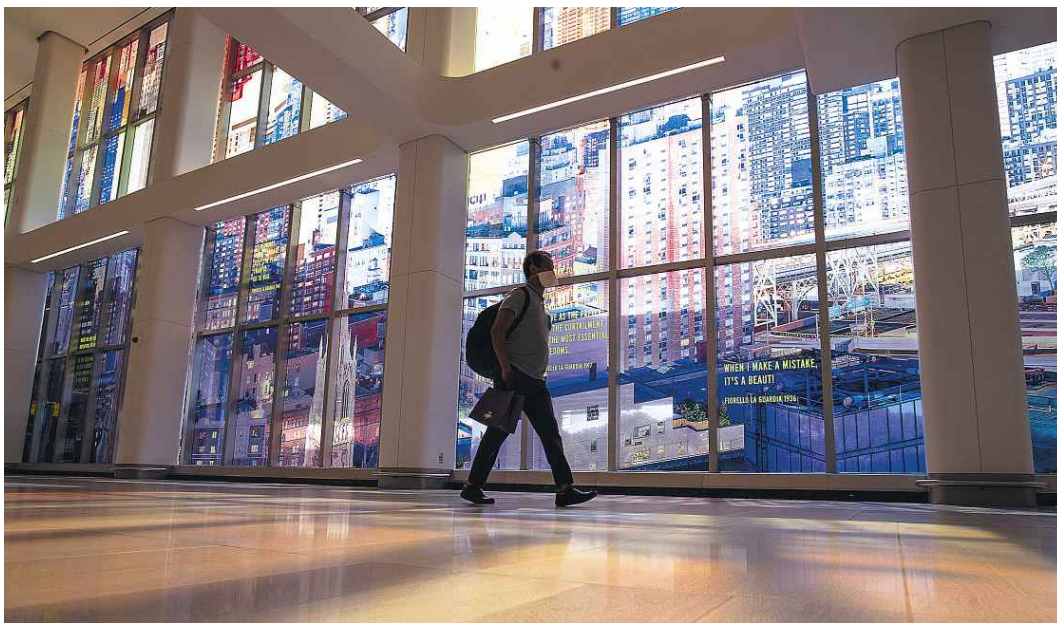
Until then: Construction inconvenience, relocated parking. Building an entirely new LaGuardia while the original airport continues operating has at times caused considerable pain for travelers within and near the airport, heaping on construction-related traffic and road closures — especially before airline travel was reduced

COREY SIPKIN



being moved 600 feet closer to the Grand Central Parkway to create more room for the taxiways.

NY GOVERNOR'S OFFICE



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A passenger strolls through one of the remodeled sections of Terminal B on Thursday.

by the pandemic. Relocating the terminals meant building over a lot of former parking spaces. The closure of the main parking garage in 2016 eliminated 2,000 parking spots and forced drivers to temporarily take shuttle buses to get to a makeshift lot to the west. In February 2018, a new seven-floor, 3,100-space parking garage opened, connecting to the new Terminal B.

THE HITCH: No more runway space

Left out of the \$8 billion airport redevelopment project is any plan to relocate, extend or add to LaGuardia's runways. Project officials said doing so could add years to the project because of the required approvals. And so, one of LaGuardia's most persistent constraints — its two notoriously short runways — isn't going to

get better anytime soon. LaGuardia's runways are 7,000 feet long. Kennedy Airport has four runways, ranging from 8,400 feet to 14,511 feet.

What they're saying:

Paul Hudson, president of Flyers Rights, a passengers advocacy group based in Sarasota, Florida, questioned how much of a difference the project could make without plans to address runway constraints. "There's no



YEONG-UNG YANG

Roads under construction beneath the control tower on Feb. 28. Roads are being streamlined to reduce the number of traffic lights.

LAGUARDIA AT A GLANCE

- **Opened in 1939.** The Central Terminal Building, now known as Terminal B, was rebuilt in 1964. Terminal D was built in 1983, and Terminal C was added in 1992.
- **Annual passengers*:** 30.1 million.
- **Annual flights*:** 372,025.
- **Size:** 680 acres.

Redevelopment project:

- **Timeline:** Proposed by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo in 2015; construction commenced in 2016; expected to be mostly completed by 2025.
- **Budget:** \$4 billion for each of the two new terminals being constructed, for a total cost of \$8 billion.
- **Funding:** About 80% of the project is funded by private companies, including LaGuardia Gateway Partners — the developer hired to rebuild, and operate, Terminal B. The Port Authority is contributing about \$2.5 billion.

Highlights:

- **A new 1.3 million-square foot Terminal B** will include a "headhouse" central terminal

building, a parking garage, and two concourses with 35 gates, 50 new shops and restaurants, and modern amenities.

■ **First of two** new concourses opened in December, 2018. Since then, 22 new gates have opened at Terminal B. A new 850,000-square foot Terminal B Arrival and Departures Hall opened in June.

■ **Delta is separately** building a new Terminal C, which will replace its existing Terminals C and D. It will include four new concourses with a total of 37 gates, views of Flushing Bay, and 30% more concessions space. Seven new gates are already open.

■ **Other features** include two miles of extra taxiway for planes; nine miles of new, streamlined roads; a reduction in traffic lights from 19 to 3.

■ **A proposed, \$2.5 billion** AirTrain linking the airport to the Mets-Willets Point LIRR station and 7 Subway line is being studied.

* According to 2018 Port Authority statistics.
Source: Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

more runway capacity really possible — certainly not at LaGuardia," Hudson said. "Without that, we're looking at more and more congestion delays, perhaps with a little nicer terminals so you can wait and shop."

THE PROBLEM: Getting in and out

LaGuardia's capacity problems had been apparent even before travelers got out of their

cars. Traffic jams originating in the roadway network often stretched for miles into the Grand Central Parkway and other roads. And travelers preferring to avoid roads altogether have no options, because LaGuardia remains the only major airport on the East Coast without a direct rail link.

The solution: Untangling

See LAGUARDIA on A4

Business **A33**
 Editorials/Opinion **A42**
 Flash! **A24**
 Long Island **A26**
 Lottery **A79**
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LaGuardia re-imagined

LAGUARDIA from A3

roadways, creating transportation alternatives.

A major component of the redevelopment effort is a transformation of the roadway system, creating nine miles of stream-lined roads. That includes 26 new bridges to replace 15 old ones. Officials said the configuration will reduce traffic lights in the airport from 19 to three. Also planned is a new 1.5-mile "AirTrain" rail system that will link the airport to the Mets-Willets Point LIRR station and the 7 subway line in Corona, Queens.

When you'll see it:

Some roadway improvements have come on line, including a flyover that opened in July 2018, extending from Exit 7 of the Grand Central to the airport's eastern terminals. Project officials said about 70% of the new roadways will be in service this summer. Project officials hope to break ground on the AirTrain next year, and to have it close to finished by 2024.

Until then: Road closures, shuttles to taxis.

The ongoing roadwork has, at times, caused massive congestion. Project officials say the worst of the traffic jams have subsided, but some temporary detours remain near the eastern terminals. While the roadwork is going on, the taxi pickup and drop-off zone has been moved farther from the terminal, requiring a shuttle bus ride to access it.

THE HITCH: AirTrain controversy

The proposed AirTrain has encountered major resistance from Queens residents, elected officials and transportation advocates, who have questioned the train's route and rationale. The Port Washington line to which the AirTrain would connect runs trains twice an hour during most times, and is the only LIRR line that does not connect to the railroad's biggest transfer point, Jamaica Station. Travelers heading to Manhattan would have to go east to return west. Those headed to most Long Island stations would have to go east to return west to Woodside, and then double back east. The AirTrain extension has soared in cost

from \$500 million to \$2.5 billion.

What they're saying:

Rebecca Pryor, a member of the Sensible Way to LGA Coalition, said the AirTrain "doesn't make sense" for various reasons, including the potential to overdevelop and pollute Flushing Bay. "It's not integrated into the existing transportation network. It doesn't add any public transit for anyone in the neighborhood. And it goes past the airport, to then turn around and go back to the airport," said Pryor, program coordinator for Guardians of Flushing Bay, an advocacy group. "For us, those are red flags."

THE PROBLEM: Uncomfortable terminals

Despite operating on 680 acres, LaGuardia regularly handles roughly the same amount of domestic passengers as sister airport Kennedy Airport, about seven times larger. Passengers arrive and depart at antiquated terminals, ranging from about 40 to 60 years old. Since they predate the push for heightened security that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, much of the concessions are located before the security gates — out of reach for passengers waiting inside terminals.

The solution: Build new, more spacious terminals with modern amenities.

Construction is underway on two terminals — priced at about \$4 billion each — that will offer a total of 2.3 million square feet of space with six new concourses connecting to 72 new gates. The terminals will offer scenic views of Flushing Bay, 55-foot-high ceilings, and state-of-the-art amenities and comforts, such as new lounges, art installations, airport-themed children's play areas, charging stations near seating areas, nursing rooms for mothers, and spacious new bathrooms — even some exclusively for pets and featuring artificial grass and mock fire hydrants. Passengers will be able to dine at a range of New York-inspired bars and restaurants, some locally owned, and shop at businesses like FAO Schwarz. New security features at the Terminal B "headhouse" aim to simplify travel, featuring three times as many security lanes and advanced screening technology



Rendering of the interior for the proposed AirTrain terminal at Willets Point, Queens. It would connect with the LIRR.



A rendering of LaGuardia Hotel inside one of the terminals.

that uses artificial intelligence and robots.

When you'll see it:

A new 243,000-square-foot concourse at Terminal B opened in December 2018 with 18 gates and new shopping and dining options. In October 2019, Delta opened the first concourse and first seven gates of its new Terminal C, which will combine the existing Terminals C and D. In June, the project reached what officials called its biggest milestone to date with the opening of a new 850,000-square-foot, four-story Arrivals and Departures Hall at Terminal B with ticketing and check-in areas, security and baggage claims. Another seven new gates at Terminal B opened weeks later, and another concourse is slated to be inaugurated later this year. A new headhouse at Delta's terminal C, and three additional concourses, are further away.

Until then: Construction inconveniences, old terminals.

Much of the work is happening out of view from passengers, but there are areas where construction is going on behind curtains, making for some noise and disruption. While two concourses are open for business, two out of three LaGuardia travelers have no other option than the older terminals that remain cramped and outdated. Even once all the terminals are open, developers will complete exten-

sive demolition work to knock down the old terminal buildings and connecting roadways.

THE HITCH: You'll have to go up and down different levels

Because developers were challenged with fitting the new airport into the existing footprint, without disrupting airport operations, much of LaGuardia's expansion has been upward. That means travelers can expect to go up and down staircases, escalators and elevators more than they're used to. As an example, getting to one of the concourse areas at the new Terminal B will require passengers to enter at street level; go up to cross a new elevated walkway; come down to a landing, and go down yet another level to reach their gates.

What they're saying:

Although Long Island MacArthur Airport, another option for New York travelers, has made strides in recent years, "LaGuardia is, and will remain, the crucial air bridge for the Long Island business community that needs access to markets and clients," said Kyle Strober, executive director for the Association for a Better Long Island, a business advocacy group. "Long Island's economic viability will always be intertwined with New York City. Therefore, improving one of the city's ports of entry is critical to our region."