Kent George
ARN’s 2012 Director Of The Year,
Large Airports Category

What’s In Store For Airports,
Airlines In 2013

What Happens To Airports
If Economy Falls Off Fiscal Cliff?

Concessionaires
Up Their Game
In Face Of Flat Traffic
Kent George has been influential in the airport industry going back four decades. As director of aviation for the Broward County Aviation Department, he's currently overseeing enhancements and additions to the infrastructure at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International (FLL).

George is perhaps more widely known for the work he did building up Pittsburgh International (PIT), where he was part of the executive team that transitioned the airport from an arm of the county government to a stand-alone operation with its own authority. He also oversaw the airport’s comeback after its hub airline filed bankruptcy and abandoned its hub. He has chaired both of the industry’s key trade organizations, Airports Council International-North America and the American Association of Airport Executives, and he has become a mentor to many.

His efforts have earned him the title of ARN’s Director of the Year in the large airports category.

Tellijohn: You arrived at FLL in 2007 and managed to push through a runway project that had been in discussions for decades. How?

George: The airport started in roughly 1988 recognizing that it needed an additional runway. We’re essentially a one-runway airport. We do have a crosswind runway, but it has a lot of restrictions on it and it’s very short. There was an attempt in the early ’90s to evaluate a 9,000-foot runway. An environmental impact statement was started. The local community was very much opposed. The airport started then because it was determined the runway needed to be operational by 2004 because of increasing delays. With all the traffic up and down the East Coast that FLL handles, we became one of the five airports that were acknowledged by the [Federal Aviation Administration] for really needing a runway.

In early 2000, it was determined they would go with a shorter runway with less impact on both the environment and the mangroves and the local community. A new EIS was started on an 8,000-foot runway. I came here in 2007. One of my charges was to finish the EIS, get a record of decision and get it built.

There was a lot of opposition, but through cooperation with the local community, including the business leaders, the Broward County Board of Commissioners and the FAA, which recognized the absolute need, the record of decision and EIS came out in December 2008. There are still lawsuits going on, but a number have been settled. The runway
is under construction. It is completely funded and it will be completed on Sept. 18, 2014, when we open it.

Telliohn: You managed to turn that around quickly. How did you overcome the opposition?

George: We managed to do it with the cooperation, coordination and help of a lot of different agencies, federal, state and local.

In Broward County’s case, the community supported the runway. There was extreme opposition from a small community that borders the airport. The county commissioners made it their policy to mitigate as much of the noise and as many of the problems as possible.

So a $175M noise-mitigation program was put together that will soundproof homes, purchase mobile home parks in the area and offer other relief.

We are in various stages of the process with about 170 homes, and another 100 will be reached out to soon. We’re going to be able to put new windows, doors, insulation and air conditioning in up to 1,700 homes around the airport, and the homeowners that have been treated already are extremely happy with the way the airport has responded. The folks that are in line for it – we go from the noisiest areas out to the less-impacted areas – are apprehensive, but they are working with us. There are more people coming on board and saying, ‘When is it going to be my turn?’

Now, even with all of this, we still have some very strong detractors. As much as an airport tries to accommodate all the wishes, you’re never going to be able to do it. So you do the best of your ability for the majority of the people who are there and you try to work with everybody.

When we were going through the process, we worked with the city of Dania Beach, which is the community that is most impacted and most upset with everything. They went with us to the FAA on a number of occasions. Even though it’s not exactly what they would like, they have tried to partner with us to try to resolve the issue. What we’re pointing out is this doesn’t happen with just the airport

Kent George, ARN’s Director of the Year for large airports, has enjoyed success both at individual airports and as a representative of industry trade organizations. He arrived at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International in 2007 after spending a decade at Pittsburgh International, where he helped the airport overcome dramatically decreased service from its hub airline.
alone. It happens with the concerted effort of all the bodies involved and the absolute recognition that the airport is one of the largest, if not the largest, economic generator to a community’s growth and future.

Tellijohn: With the runway under construction, you’ve turned your attention to a number of other projects at FLL. What are the details?

George: Three of FLL’s terminals were opened in 1985 and the last one was opened in 2000. All of them were built pre-Sept. 11 and require modifications to hold rooms, security check points and concessions. We’re in the process of doing about $150M of work on that in Terminals 1, 2 and 3, and we’re in the process also of rebuilding completely Terminal 4, our international terminal, to go from 10 to 14 gates.

On the existing terminal, we have six international gates and four domestic. What we’re going to be going to is 12 swing gates, which are capable of both international and domestic, and two domestic gates. Those will open in various stages between 2015, 2016 and 2017.

You’ve got to realize we still are growing. Last year, we surpassed our all-time high and this year we expect to surpass that. We’re going to approach 24 million passengers this year.

We’re also working with U.S. Customs in expanding their facility because of the demand of international flights and the expansion in that area. That’s one of our significant growth areas. We’re in the process of evaluating the existing facilities and expanding them to somewhere around 1,100 to 1,200 passengers per hour.

Tellijohn: How have you avoided a lot of the major traffic hits with which some of your colleagues around the industry have dealt?

George: It has to do with our market. Over 60% of our traffic is provided by low-cost carriers. Our fares are approximately 30% lower than our competition, two airports to the north and south of us.

Tellijohn: Before you arrived at FLL, you faced several challenges at PIT with US Airways pulling most of its business. How did you deal with that situation?

George: PIT was established and...
FLL avoided many of the doldrums other airports have struggled with in recent years. The airport has shown positive passenger growth throughout most of the past four years and expects to approach 24 million travelers for 2012.

Designed for US Airways as a hub to handle approximately 32 million passengers at its peak. The most US Airways ever reached was 19 million passengers in 2000 or 2001. Everybody knows what happened. Since then, they went bankrupt twice and they de-hubbed Pittsburgh.

I'll say this very clearly. The previous management of US Airways - not the current management - the previous management that handled it during bankruptcy was a case in point how not to handle bankruptcy and how not to work with your community and your airport.

US Airways literally undermined the entire hub structure at PIT without any notice to the community and took the operation from about 12,000 employees to somewhere around 800 to 1,000. The airport is doing a tremendous job now under Brad Penrod of maintaining the facilities they have and of being able to meet the requirements of the community in terms of passenger airlines and traffic. Unfortunately, the community was used to 600 flights per day going to something like one-quarter of those destinations both nationally and internationally.

Today, they go to their top business markets, but I think it's fewer than half the markets. It's very good service for a community of their size, but not if you compare it with what they had before.

This is what a lot of airports that are being de-hubbed are faced with. I think Pittsburgh has done a very good job of recovering, but there are other airports out there that are in the throes of trying to put themselves back together and reinvent themselves.

Airports are very resilient. The managers and the communities that run them do it on a business basis. They haven't declared bankruptcy. They haven't restructured their debt and done what the airlines have done. They've done it in a very responsible and positive and business-like fashion.

Tellijohn: Do you have any advice from your days at PIT that others may be able to use if similar situations arise at their airports?

George: One of the most important things is through the bankruptcy procedures you need to get on the creditors committee. Second, you don't have to wait for an airline to tell you what they are going to do because in most cases they don't know. What you have to do is mold your future and realize the airline is trying to survive. You have a market that is based on origin and destination traffic and you have to build your facility around that market and reinvent yourself regardless of what that airline is going to do.

If you have an O&D market, someone is going to serve it because there is money to be made there. The airline that is in bankruptcy is trying to survive. You have to be in survival mode also. You have to look out for your own interests and your community's best interest, because that is who you are serving. You have got to look out for that and you have to make sure those basic needs are met.

The way the community pulled together in Pittsburgh - the business community, the tourism community, the convention and visitors bureau, and the governmental agencies - they went with me and met with various airlines to impress upon them how committed they were to the airport.

Southwest Airlines came in at that time. JetBlue Airlines came in at that time. You've got to work with your community. It's not the airport authority's airport or the airport director's airport. It is the community's airport and you have to work with the community to make it come together with a synergistic plan.

Tellijohn: You've been in aviation since 1965 and in airport management since 1972. What drew you to the industry and what has kept you here?

George: I've been lucky. When I was in the military, I was in aviation. When I got out of the military, I went to college. I was going to fly for a living but I determined that flying wasn't as self-fulfilling to me as airport management was and I've been very lucky that, with very few exceptions, I've looked forward to getting up in the morning and going to an airport.

I've had the fortune to not only be involved in the Jet Age but I was also involved in the winding down of the reciprocating age. So I have jet fuel in my blood. It has been very self-fulfilling to me to be involved. It's been my pleasure and
honor to work in this industry and make a little bit of a difference in the communities I serve. I enjoy the excitement, the challenge, the ability to be able to make a difference, to take something that is needed and build it, fund it, finance it and put it through. That is very self-actualizing to me.

Tellijohn: What are the biggest changes you've seen in the industry during your time?

George: Sept. 11 and the complete rethinking of how we provide our services to the community. The advent of the jet and now the cost of fuel. The funding of airports and hopefully the realization that keeps growing of the importance of airports to the overall economy of the country, if not the world. Those are some pretty big things.

Tellijohn: You recently finished a term on the ACI World board. How does the U.S. industry compare with the rest of the world?

George: The U.S. used to be the leader. The FAA used to be the leader. The International Civil Aviation Organization has become a bit more predominant in the overall world. I think we're lacking in getting on with NextGen. I think we have improved greatly on the safety aspects. Airports have responded energetically to ensure that safety and security are the most important things we do. The industry is well served by ACI-NA and by ACI World and by AAAE and the professionalism they provide with their training programs and accreditation.

ACI now has a world accreditation, too. The professionalism of the airport industry, it's very satisfying to see how that has grown and how seriously it is taken.

Tellijohn: Having chaired both ACI-NA and AAAE and being involved in these national issues, do you see ways airports and the industry could better operate? What would you like to see incorporated?

George: The aviation industry is one of the most regulated there is, even though they deregulated it in 1977. Proprietors' rights and the funding of airports, the business aspects, are so important as we go forward.

The industry has to try to reinvent itself. Congress needs to make sure they continue on with the funding of NextGen. We've got to realize the infrastructure itself...
is being paid for by users of the aviation industry. We have to look at how we can restructure. Passenger facility charges haven’t been raised since 2000 and the effective buying rate has been reduced. Large airports can really function quite well on their own, within parameters, but without all the regulations.

We need to plan for the future. When I talked to you about Terminal 4, we planned for it, we’re under construction for part of it. To build these large infrastructure improvements while you are still operating an airport, it takes a lot of time. Everybody recognizes this industry is very cyclical. We are coming out of a downturn. The industry and the economy are turning around. Soon we are going to be approaching 1 billion passengers and we are behind in getting these facilities built.

And it’s not a build-it-and-they-will-come mentality. ... We’ve got a demand and we have to do it, and again, it has got to be done as a partnership.

Telljohn: So you support ACI’s efforts to change the industry’s funding model?

George: I believe the ACI model is a very good starting point. Nobody else has come up with anything better. We have to address it now so we’re not in a panic in two years when the reauthorization bill is up again.

Telljohn: Who were your mentors?

George: John “Red” MacFarlane gave me my first job at Harrisburg International (MDT). George Bean mentored me and spent time with me when I was going to school here at Embry Riddle for my undergraduate degree and he was running Tampa International (TPA). Wilfred ‘Wiley’ Post was involved at Lehigh Valley International (ABE) (then known as Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton Airport), when I was in Pennsylvania, both at MDT and at Reading Regional (RDG). And George Kirk, when he was involved at the accreditation program and before he retired as director of Quad City International (MLI) in Moline, mentored me and spent time with me. Those are some real icons in the industry that I had the pleasure of knowing and working with.

Telljohn: What is your style for managing and mentoring?

George: My management style is participatory. I like to work with people and try to mentor people. I’ve got a number of people in the industry who started out as interns who are now running and working in airports. I’ve benefited and learned from them and I’ve had a great time doing it. I know it’s an old cliche, but I get to learn something every day. I’ve got a lot of people who work around me that are very smart. I get to enjoy that and watch them do work and develop and help this industry.

Telljohn: How do you pass the time when you are not working on airport-related activities?

George: I like to play golf. My golf game used to be very good, it’s fairly good now. It’s obviously not good enough because I’m still an airport director. I also like to shoot and I like to hunt, occasionally fish and spend time with my four grandkids.

Telljohn: Is there anything else you would like to add?

George: There is someone who is very important in this whole thing. I’ve been married 43 years now to Barbara. A majority of my success can be attributed to her. She’s followed me to different airports around the country and supported me. She’s not only been my wife, but she’s been my friend.

We’d like to hear your opinion about this article. Please direct all correspondence to Andrew Telljohn at andrew@airportrevenue.com.
Kent George has accomplished a lot during his four decades in the airport industry, and it hasn’t all come easily. He helped grow Pittsburgh International (PIT) in its early days and then led the transition when its hub airline, US Airways, pulled most of its flights with little notice.

He arrived at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International (FLL) in 2007 and immediately set out to build the bridges in the community necessary to pass a runway expansion, succeeding where others hadn’t gotten past the discussion stages for nearly two decades.

George also has served on behalf of the entire industry, leading two trade organizations as chairman and helping steer through some tough times, such as when he proactively assembled a team of colleagues to work with the Federal Aviation Administration on enhanced security regulations following Sept. 11.

“I’ve known Kent a long time,” says Rick Piccolo, president and CEO of Sarasota Bradenton International (SRO). “He’s always been a great professional. The thing about Kent is he’s handled some very difficult situations very successfully.”

Fundamental Changes At PIT

George may be known best for the work he did at PIT. When he arrived there in 1998, it was still a department of Allegheny County. Shortly thereafter, it was spun off and the Allegheny County Airport Authority formed.

During his tenure, George built a team of advisors around him whom he frequently went to for assistance. He was responsible for the airport starting to collect revenue from passenger facility charges to help offset infrastructure projects, and his knowledge of the inner workings of the FAA allowed PIT to collect millions in grants over the years for projects in a number of different categories, says Glenn R. Mahone, former chairman of the airport board.

Mahone says he was amazed by the degree of planning George did in order to be ready whenever funding was available.

“Before Kent took over, I don’t think we had gotten a dime in grants from the FAA other than to build the airport,” Mahone says. “One of the strategies he deployed, with our blessing, was he always had advanced planning and projects on the shelf. So, [notification] might come down from the FAA at the end of the year saying, ‘We’ve got money for chicken coupes.’ And Kent would say, ‘I’ve got a chicken coup project right here. Give me the money.’ And we would get money for those projects. He knows how the government works.”

George’s long-term planning skills were helpful when US Airways, the airline that controlled nearly 90% of PIT’s traffic, went
bankrupt twice, ultimately pulling its hub from PIT with little notice and dropping its flight load at the airport from 500 a day to about 80.

Mahone says he and George already had been working to court Southwest Airlines and jetBlue Airways prior to the US Airways departure, which helped mitigate the struggles associated with lost business.

"We were working on reducing our dependence on" US Airways, Mahone says. "We got through two bankruptcies from the biggest airline in the place. We never had to invade our debt service reserve" and ultimately the airport received an upgrade from Moody's to a higher credit rating than PIT ever had with US Airways as its dominant tenant.

"Kent George fundamentally revolutionized the Pittsburgh airport," Mahone says. "Kent is a student of aviation, the FAA and some of the political realities associated with that. He brought that knowledge and that tremendous Rolodex. Kent is a very well-met guy. He has a lot of interests and a lot of expertise that he can bring to bear on a number of situations."

Buddling Bridges At FLL

The work George did at PIT was definitely noticed by Broward County, Fla., when it was seeking a new director at FLL. County Administrator Bertha Henry says George has picked up where he left off in Pittsburgh.

The two officials could not be more different, she says. He is an outdoorsman with a deer-head trophy adorning his office wall, and she could not be less interested in hunting. But they constantly spar good-naturedly and they have a solid working relationship, in part because he is able to tell her what the airport needs while also understanding that she has multiple priorities to balance, she says.

"We have a good relationship in that he is not uncomfortable telling me what I need to know," Henry says. "He's not uncomfortable accepting that sometimes things will take a backseat for the greater good."

When George was hired, FLL was in the midst of two decades of planning and negotiating for the new runway it needed to expand the airport's capacity. Environmental statements were not completed and there were ongoing legal disputes with communities. After learning what George struggled with at PIT, she had a sense he was the person for the job.

That $1B runway expansion is well under way, Henry says she appreciates that George also has implemented a program for training and certifying airport employees and has several other enhancements in the works, as well.

"Were it not for his understanding of airports - he has built a few in his day - I don't know that we would have been able
to do all that we have done in such a short time," Henry says. "This is someone who eats, breathes and sleeps airports."

**Humility, Relationship Building Get Things Done**

Broward County Mayor John Rodstrom has been impressed with how George handled himself well in leading the charge for the high-profile runway, but he has not neglected his day-to-day responsibilities as a director, either. George helped lead the airport through the difficult recession with few missteps, putting the airport in position to hit the ground running as the economy improves.

"He's been a pleasure to work with," Rodstrom says. "He's a guy you can talk to, he's reasonable, he understands the interplay between government and running an airport."

**Deeply Involved In Industry Causes**

George's successes have not been confined to the walls of the airports he has run. He is deeply concerned about and involved with the entire industry and has led, as chairman, both Airports Council International-North America and the American Association of Airport Executives.

Louis Miller, aviation general manager at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International (ATL), says George is just as committed to ensuring the entire airport industry is represented well politically and achieves success. George, he noted, led the formation of a panel that ultimately hired Greg Principato as president and CEO of ACI-NA. That hire was instrumental in ACI-NA re-establishing itself as a strong lobbying arm for the industry.

"He did an excellent job on that," Miller says. "He reached out to the community very well."

Also during his tenure on the ACI-NA board, he was vital in getting airports together to work proactively with the federal government on security enhancements and regulations after Sept. 11. His collaborative approach has served him well in both his jobs and in his work with industry trade organizations, says Miller, adding that George has done a remarkable job at working with the different stakeholders at FLL.

One of the keys to successfully operating in the airport industry is being able to bring people together, something at which George excels, Miller continues.

"He's a tremendous individual," Miller says. "He's very committed to the aviation industry.... His ultimate goal is the same as all of ours is. It's to get things done. He wants to get things accomplished. He's got a great sense about him."

SRQ's Piccolo says George has been active in working with Congress on FAA reauthorization and on re-establishing ACI-NA's role as a lobbying organization for the industry.

Piccolo adds that George has a gentle manner to him that commands authority but also allows others to feel free approaching him for advice or guidance.

"If you have an issue, he is very helpful," he says.

**Industry Brethren Highly Respect George**

Dick Dickson, chairman at The Paradies Shops, has known George since he was at Quad City International (MLI) throughout most of the 1990s. He says George is highly respected, committed to the industry and an absolute professional who brings people together. George has dealt with some difficult "hot potato" issues and always managed to come out with the airport in a better position than when it started.

"He's gained their trust while getting the job done," Dickson says of people with whom George was settling disputes and disagreements. "The industry always feels like with Kent they'll be treated fairly. He looks at the big picture."

Dickson also respects George for being dedicated to his wife, children and grandchildren.

"You know when someone is a good family man," he says.

One of George's best friends in the industry is Steve Grossman, CEO at Jacksonville International (JAX). The two have worked closely together and their families associate often. Grossman called George "a father figure" and adds that he calls on George frequently for feedback on issues facing his own airport.

"The word leader exemplifies Kent," Grossman says. "If you look at his career, he has been a leader for decades."

**Golfing, Outdoors Activities Fill His Free Time**

Grossman, Piccolo and others provided many reasons why they respect George, including the successes he's had in difficult circumstances in Fort Lauderdale and Pittsburgh. They also point to George as a frequent partner and mentor on the golf course.

Piccolo calls George a great golfer and says his own game isn't as good, despite George's efforts to assist.

"He helped me as much as possible given the limits of my ability," Piccolo says. "His patience on the golf course was quite significant."

He's as analytical about golf as he is about his work, adds Grossman, who says George will spend 18 holes attempting to identify and then correct whatever mistakes he might be making.

"If he's playing well, he's pretty happy," Grossman says. "If he is not playing well, he gets very analytical and verbal, always trying to figure out what little thing he is doing wrong."

George also is an outdoorsman who particularly enjoys hunting, whether it's deer or heading to the Everglades after big game, such as alligators, Grossman says.

Grossman, however, jokes that he's got a surprise for his friend the next time he heads to Jacksonville on a hunting trip.

"I've armed the deer," he says. "I think that's fair."

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