

Southwest regional airport ‘will survive’ pandemic

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NORTH BEND — The last time Helen Mineau saw flights canceled like she is now it was after 9/11.

As chairman of the Coos County Airport District for Southwest Oregon Regional Airport and owner of Globe Travel in North Bend, Mineau has a front-row seat to another economic crisis. Except this time, it is being brought on by the novel coronavirus, which she said is different than the 2001 terrorist attack because, “Now we have no idea what’s going on ... But the reality is it will probably take another month or two before it goes back to normal because people are still getting sick.”

Though the stay-in-place orders have taken a toll on travel and local businesses, SORA Executive Director Theresa Cook said the airport itself is stable for now.

“In the short term ... it doesn’t affect how we manage the airport,” Cook said.

This is because the airport sees most of its revenue from businesses and organizations renting space on its property. Right now, the airport has 33 renters. This includes office buildings for Oregon State Police, Department of Human Services, Bureau of Land Management, FedEx and UPS.

“We have a very stable base of tenants,” Cook explained. “In the long term, we have some businesses that aren’t essential services and will feel an impact.”

She pointed out that some of these non-essential services might face trouble making rent if the pandemic and restrictions continue.

“Right now, the Federal Aviation Administration doesn’t have an allowance for us to give waivers for airlines or airport users, but we will look at it if — in the long term — it becomes an issue for them to pay rent,” she said.

Though the airport isn’t seeing an impact in loss of revenue, it has been working to establish flights to Portland. It received a \$750,000 grant from the Department of Transportation, which the airport applied for almost a year and a half ago. Due to the government shutdown last year, the grant wasn’t approved until recently.

“... In a way that is fortunate because we might have negotiated a route by now and that might have been shut down,” Cook said. “Now when (the pandemic) is over, the airlines that survive — hopefully all but I’ve heard smaller ones might not — they will look for airports that have capital. So, we might be looked at more favorably and have less competition to get flights to Portland more regularly.”

But Mineau sees startling similarities between 9/11 to the ongoing pandemic in terms of her travel business and the cancellation of flights.

In the aftermath of the 2001 attack, she had to lay off all of her employees at Globe Travel because she had no income at the time to pay them.

“... Which is kind of what’s happening now,” she said. “Right now, every day you get a new list of rules and airlines (that) aren’t giving back any money. It is constantly changing and is more frustrating now because it was easier when no one flew for 10 days”

Now Mineau is busy trying to bring home local residents who were traveling while flights started to be canceled.

“We are working to get them home,” she said, adding that as of Thursday last week they were dealing with 75 families. “We’re taking care of them by being proactive and not reactive. We’re getting them home and are making sure they know what’s going on.”

According to Mineau, the airport is also entering its busiest season which spans from April through September. Most of those flying are golfers intent on visiting Bandon Dunes Golf Resort, which also has restrictions in place due to the pandemic.

“Right now, May is booked full, all the way into June,” Mineau said. “They book 11 months ahead of time.”

She said the airport sees even more air traffic in the summer months from corporate jets that fly in for business.

“The airport will survive,” Mineau assured. “And from the travel perspective, I’m telling people be patient ... Let’s pray this gets over quickly.”