

# \$519M makeover planned at Dallas' Love Field

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Dallas Love Field's future looks like its 1970s heyday.

A \$519 million capital improvement project for what was once the nation's eighth-busiest airport is set to break ground in June.

Love Field once had more than 70 gates and Boeing 747 jumbo jets rumbling down its runways.

But after Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport opened in 1974, Love became an aviation ghost town. It even briefly sported a roller rink inside an abandoned terminal.

Dallas-based Southwest Airlines Co. kept the airport alive and steadily grew, despite federal restrictions on how far its planes could fly from Love.

The last of those restrictions will end in 2014 – the target date for Southwest and the city of Dallas to complete most of the airport improvements.

The work will replace the existing terminals with a new 20-gate concourse, expand baggage facilities and spruce up a facility that hasn't had this much attention in decades.

The upgrades and future new routes are expected to nearly double Love Field's passenger traffic from its current 4 million passengers a year to about 8 million annually, which would beat the 1973 peak of 6.6 million. That's still far short of the roughly 27 million passengers that get on planes at D/FW airport annually.

"There will be surprisingly little customer impact during the project," said Daniel Weber, city director of aviation. Much of the initial phases of demolition and construction won't be particularly visible from the current facilities, he said.

Under the plan, the existing terminals – and their combined 20 gates – will come down as a new T-shaped building rises. The first gates of the new concourse are expected to open in 2011.

The biggest hang-up may be extensive work on the lower passenger drop-off road in front of the airport that will be completed in phases, said assistant director Terry Mitchell.

"We're building something the citizens of Dallas will be very proud of," Mitchell said.

Still under consideration is a proposed underground people-mover from the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Green Line to the new terminal. A feasibility study continues, and a report about its costs won't come until the fall, Weber said.

Southwest is managing the improvement project for the city and has the ability to spend up to \$75 million to get it started while Dallas waits for the right time to sell bonds to finance most of the improvements.

Those bonds will be paid for by higher landing fees and gate rentals paid by Southwest and other airlines, and also by ticket fees called passenger facility charges.

Passengers now pay \$3 each time they go through Love; that's likely to rise, but the process to increase the fee is long and complicated, Weber said.

Revenue from additional parking and concessions also will help fund the work. Love Field's current 23,000 square feet of food and retail concession space will increase to more than 57,000 under the expansion, Mitchell said. That means more restaurant variety and new shops.

The airline landscape at Love won't change much with the project. The airport can't add any gates, and Southwest will end up with 16 of them. Houston-based Continental Airlines Inc. will keep two gates, and Fort Worth-based American Airlines Inc. will have two. The three airlines together have about 160 departures daily from Love Field.

"It had been many years since the Love terminal had been updated, and it was obvious that work was needed to make Love Field a modern airport," American spokesman Tim Wagner said. The carrier currently serves Chicago's O'Hare International Airport from Love Field.

Southwest spokeswoman Beth Harbin said the carrier's experience managing other airport improvement projects will help smooth the transition for passengers and keep the airline running on time.

"We know what works in these projects and what doesn't," she said.

Still to be seen is how popular Love will be when the law that restricts flights from the airport, the Wright Amendment, expires in just over five years, allowing airlines to fly anywhere from Love.

Southwest has already seen the passenger benefits from the end of Wright's "through-ticket" restrictions at Love Field. Instead of having to buy two separate tickets to fly, passengers now can buy one-stop travel anywhere in the country on just one ticket, boosting Love Field traffic by nearly 1 million passengers a year.

"What's helped us so far is that we've been actually able to sell these tickets, and we've got an inkling of where people want to go," Harbin said.

Southwest and city officials will discuss the future of Love Field at a meeting today hosted by the North Dallas Chamber of Commerce at the Frontiers of Flight museum near the airport.

#### TIMELINE

Here are target dates for improvements at Love Field:

**June:** Preliminary demolition work on buildings begins, none of it visible to passengers.

**Second quarter 2009:** Major demolition begins on areas such as the north terminal.

**Fourth quarter 2009:** Construction of a new concourse building begins.

**2011:** The first gates of the new concourse open.

**2012:** The second stage of construction on the new concourse starts.

**Late 2013:** The west terminal building is demolished, and baggage area is under construction.

**Late 2014:** Wright amendment restrictions are lifted; most construction is completed.

SOURCE: City of Dallas