

Hopping a Train to Hopkins: Cleveland's Rail-Air Connection – the Nation's First – Builds on Success

By Scott Bogren

Every year, more than 11 million people pass through Cleveland, Ohio's Hopkins International Airport. Few likely realize, however, the astounding number of safety, efficiency and technological advances that were first introduced at Hopkins. Originally known as Cleveland International, the airport was renamed in 1951 for its founder, William Hopkins on his 82nd birthday. Two decades prior, in 1930, the airport saw the world's control tower, the first ground-to-air radio control system and the first deployment of an airfield lighting system – each of which soon became standard at airports worldwide.

Of course for the purposes of

RAIL Magazine, the most important innovation at Hopkins occurred in 1968 when it became the first U.S. Airport to be directly connected to a regional rail transit system. This direct access between downtown Cleveland and the airport continues to this day. As more than 30,000 passengers and employees use the Cleveland Regional Transit Authority's (RTA) Cleveland Hopkins International Airport station every month.

"Our service to the airport is critically important to both the RTA and to the greater Cleveland region," says General Manager Joe Calabrese. "It makes living and working in Cleveland more convenient and

contributes to the local economy."

Looking to the future, Hopkins Airport has emerged as a central component in both state and regional intercity passenger rail efforts. The Ohio Rail Development Commission's 2007 report, the *Ohio and Lake Erie Regional Rail Ohio Hub Study*, places Hopkins at the intersection of two vital future passenger and freight rail lines – one traveling from Toledo in the northwest through Cleveland and on to Pittsburgh, Pa., to the southeast, the other connecting Cincinnati in the southwest with Columbus, Cleveland and all the way to Buffalo, N.Y. The Hub Plan, if built, would increase Hopkins air traffic by 5

percent and generate more than \$500 million in local economic benefit.

“Cleveland’s economic base has gone from being centered on corporate headquarters to one focused on the financial, legal and accounting sectors,” says Downtown Cleveland Alliance President and CEO Joseph Marinucci. “These sectors and their employees take great advantage of the RTA’s convenient downtown-to-airport rail connection.”

An American First

The Cleveland RTA’s heavy rail system began service in the spring of 1955, with the original segment connecting the city’s downtown train station – Cleveland Union Terminal (known since 1991 as the Tower City Center) – with the neighborhoods to the city’s east. The original station in East Cleveland was known as Windermere, in reference to a streetcar barn/bus barn – *the Windermere Car barn* – was directly adjacent to the station. The system was then run by the Cleveland Transit System – a city department.

Completed in 1927, the city’s Union Terminal is a story unto itself. Designed as a grand station for all of the railroad service entering Cleveland, what emerged was a

Hopkins Airport’s namesake – Cleveland City Manager William R. Hopkins.



seven-building complex – that included the tallest building west of New York City – over a fully underground rail station. Stores, restaurants, hotels and office space called the area home, as did most passenger rail operations – notably, the Pennsylvania continued to serve its lake-front station, a glimpse of what was to come.

According to rail station expert Janet Greenstein Potter and her book, *Great American Railroad Stations*, Cleveland’s Union Terminal suffered from bad timing in much the same way as Cincinnati’s art deco masterpiece, the Union Terminal. No sooner was it built than the Great Depression descended and auto and airline competition grew. By the early 1970s, Amtrak had abandoned the station altogether for a lake-front stop and thoughts had turned to adaptive use plans. Yet passenger rail remained. Presently, the station’s designers had included two waiting concourses for rapid transit lines, which finally arrived in 1955 and have been in use ever since. In 1990, the RTA – which had been formed 15 years prior to take over the bus and rail routes of the city’s Cleveland Transit System – rebuilt the rail station beneath the center.

A key moment in the life of

The nation’s first rail-to-airport connection began in 1968.



Cleveland’s Red Line came in 1968 when the first Urban Mass Transit Administration construction grant allowed the system to extend the rapid transit line some four miles southwest to Hopkins Airport. It was the first such air-rail connection in the Western Hemisphere.

“Cleveland has been home to a number of transportation firsts – transit has always had a robust presence here,” says Calabrese.

Today, the RTA moves 200,000 people a day and the system is coping – like most others around the nation – with diminished local and state transit investment due to the lagging economy. Not surprisingly, ridership is down slightly as the local unemployment rate nears 11 percent. In response, the RTA is forging more efficient connections between its bus and rail services.

“We would like to expand service, to become more regional,” says Calabrese, “but the time isn’t right for that. Instead, we’re ensuring that our bus and rail services don’t compete with one another and instead work in concert.” In April, the RTA is planning a series of service changes that will further these efforts, connecting another dozen bus routes with rail stations.



The Tower City Center (center left) included the nation's tallest building outside of New York. Today, it is the busiest station in the RTA system.

Tower of Transit

At the heart of these intermodal advances and the RTA system as a whole is none other than the Tower City Station – once the Union Terminal – right in the heart of the city. Calabrese estimates that the RTA system transports more than 100,000 people a day through either the station itself or in the immediate vicinity on buses.

“This historic transit area is the hub of our system,” says Calabrese. “Whenever discussions take place about future intercity rail plans or transit expansions in Cleveland, I always remind them that we already have the ideal site – Tower City.”

Tower City is also likely to be the site of the first of Ohio’s planned casinos. In November, Ohio voters passed a casino referendum, the first of which to be built in Cleveland.

“The first casino in the state will be in Tower City with direct access to transit and the airport,” says Marinucci.

And as bus and rail transit in Cleveland shapes itself for the future, so

too are changes underway at Hopkins Airport. New passenger amenities with stores and services are being built – changes that will surely increase passenger traffic and employment simultaneously. The emergence of these improvements at the airport position, as well as the intermodalism engendered by the RTA’s trains and buses, place Hopkins square in the sights of those seeking to develop Ohio-based intercity rail services that connect together the state’s three C’s: Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland.

The Ohio Hub Project

For the past decade, the Ohio Department of Transportation and its Ohio Rail Development Commission have conducted a number of intercity passenger rail studies designed to connect the Buckeye State with passenger trains.

These plans recently received a massive boost recently, as the so-called 3C route connecting Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati – including

a station at Hopkins Airport – was selected by the Obama Administration for \$400 million of ARRA investment.

“This announcement signals both a new day for passenger rail across Ohio as well as confirms that our planning has been sound,” says Stu Nicholson, Public Information Officer for the Ohio Rail Development Commission.

Last September, an Amtrak study of the 3C route estimated that more than 500,000 people a year would ride the service – in large measure because it runs through more than 60 percent of the state’s population. Running at speeds up to 79 miles per hour, the 3C service is seen as comparable to similar state-supported intercity rail operations in Illinois, Michigan and Maine.

In virtually every Ohio intercity passenger rail plan produced, Hopkins Airport appears as a key station stop. It is, in fact, one of only two stations – downtown Cleveland being the other, that are planned for both corridors that make up the Ohio Hub Plan.

“The Downtown Cleveland Alliance is excited about prospects for the 3C line,”

says Marinucci. “The proposed Hopkins Airport stop on the 3C could give us the ability to attract more passengers from south of Cleveland to the airport.”

The 3C connection at Hopkins Airport is vital,” says Nicholson. “Our goal is seamless travel and air connections are every bit as important as those with local transit or taxis.”

Marinucci goes on to explain that Continental Airlines (for which Hopkins is a hub) is looking to attract another 25 or 30 passengers in order for its international service model to cities like London and Paris to succeed.

Elaine Roberts, President and CEO of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, sees the air and rail connection only becoming more important.

“Europe has already started packaging together rail and air passenger services – even going so far as to enable through-to-destination luggage checking at rail stations,” she says.

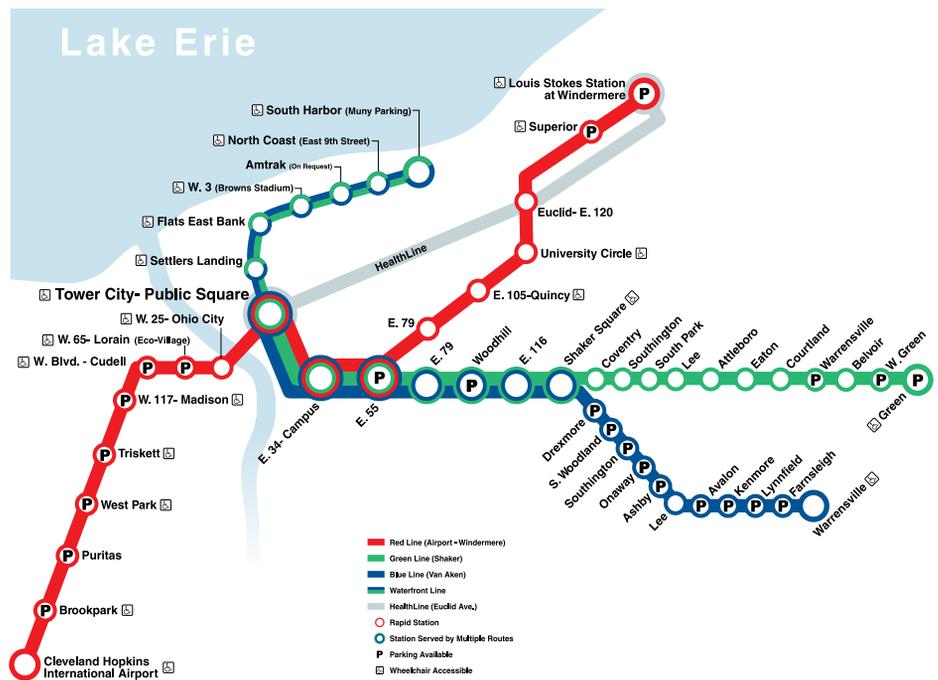
The Columbus Airport Authority has been supportive of the 3C plan and Roberts is hopeful that local rail transit initiatives will soon bring transit to her facility.

“Our long-range plans with Ohio Hub include linking many of the airports along the route as possible,” says Nicholson.

The Hopkins Legacy

Airports have become more than places from which people catch a flight, they are now local and regional economic engines that are vital to the future of the areas they serve. Cleveland was one of the first American cities to also understand the multi-modal future of airports – and the intercity passenger rail efforts now underway for the state of Ohio fully integrate Hopkins airport in hopes of expanding its intermodalism exponentially.

In many ways this multimodal future for the airport was envisioned by its namesake nearly a century ago. William Hopkins – before he became Cleveland’s City Manager in 1924 and long before the airport he helped build was given his name – obtained a franchise from the Cleveland city council in 1909 to build and operate a



The Cleveland RTA map – the Hopkins Airport station serves both passengers and employees.



The Ohio Hub map – Note the Hopkins Airport station's central location in the plans.

subway line beneath the busy Euclid Avenue. Hopkins vigorously supported all modes of transportation and understood their central role in the future of the city he so loved. No doubt he would be proud to see his namesake airport’s intermodal role in the future of Cleveland, and all of Ohio. 

