

TRAVEL & TOURISM

'NO ONE ELSE DOES WHAT WE DO'

Daren Griffin lands in town to run the Columbus Regional Airport Authority and oversee its \$2 billion terminal project.

Daren Griffin is the new CEO of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority

DAN TRITTSCHUH FOR CBF



By [Zachary Jarrell](#) – Staff reporter, Columbus Business First
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Daren Griffin always knew what kind of career lay ahead of him.

“I knew out of high school I wanted to work in airports,” he said. “No one in my family was in aviation. I blame Hollywood – the aviation movies of the ’70s and ’80s sparked something.”

In fact, Griffin was so committed that he attended Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and received a degree in aviation business administration, even though some people “didn’t believe it was a thing.”

And when he graduated, he quickly grabbed a job as an airport operations officer at a small airport in Yuma, Arizona and “loved every day of it.”

“This business is never boring,” Griffin said. “Things change constantly. On tough days, I walk the terminal, watch families reconnect, remember people fly for all kinds of reasons – not all happy ones – and remember the importance of what we do.

“No one else does what we do.”

Now a seasoned leader who most recently served as CEO of the Reno-Tahoe Airport Authority, Griffin is leading the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, which owns and operates John Glenn Columbus International, Rickenbacker International and Bolton Field. He started Feb. 2.

In detail

Name: Daren Griffin

Title: CEO, Columbus Regional Airport Authority

Last position: CEO, Reno-Tahoe Airport Authority

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

With the new terminal, I imagine that’s a lot for a new CEO. What has the crash course been like?

Well, thankfully, I have been involved with a lot of large capital programs.

That was part of the exciting opportunity here – a \$2 billion new terminal build is rare in this country. There are almost 400 commercial service airports and maybe half a dozen of them are getting completely new terminals this decade. Columbus is in rare company to be able to do that.

These are once-in-a-career projects. Most cities just keep adding on or remodeling. This building has been remodeled probably more times than anyone can count, so I applaud the decision to build for the next century.

With the project underway and rising out of the ground, what do you see as your role in getting it across the finish line?

You're right, the cake has been baked. My job is to keep it on schedule, on budget and safe.

Scope, schedule and budget are all the things we focus on, but beyond that is planning for Day One. We want to maximize the experience of the new terminal. We want the most amount of aircraft flying we can possibly get in there. We want everything open and operating. You just want it to be an incredible Day One.

We have three years to prepare for the night when the last flight leaves this terminal and the first flight arrives at the new one. That's a one-night event – it's going to be a long night – and we can't still be figuring out how we're going to operate.

We want to take full advantage of all the strategic opportunities that this new terminal represents from the very first day.



A rendering of the marketplace section of the proposed new terminal.

GENSLER/MOODY NOLAN

More internally, this is a \$2 billion project and we are borrowing \$1.67 billion of that. The airport authority pays that back through rents and fees largely from the airlines. That's a very different financial model; we have very little debt today and we've saved a lot of cash to help fund the project. But I have to get us ready to live with a very large mortgage – it's like going from a home you own to buying the most expensive house in the subdivision.

Most importantly, we need to continue working closely with our airline partners. They've backed this project and they understand the mortgage raises rent.

Airlines don't make an almost \$2 billion investment unless they plan to fly more, more often and to more places. It's an incredibly positive sign that the airlines have committed to Central Ohio like this.

This job isn't just big for the airport; it's big for the region's business community. In your first couple of weeks, what has it been like acclimating to a new business community?

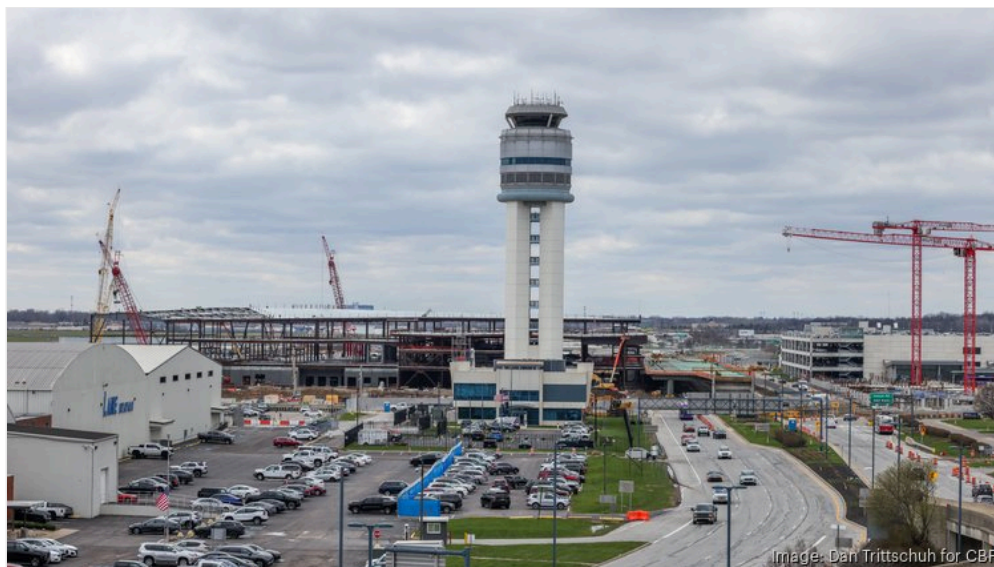
It's been really great. The business community was part of the appeal of this role.

Central Ohio is growing. Columbus and Central Ohio work really well together attracting new businesses and that growth needs to be accounted for at the airport. It's the first and last impression.

We have a three-airport system and all three airports play important roles. I've been meeting with elected officials, business leaders, the airport authority board and our team. The enthusiasm from the business community, government and our elected officials has been palpable.

With all the growth and industries here, the airport has to enable economic growth and development. We have to provide the infrastructure and assets businesses need to use aviation in any way that benefits their growth.

As I've landed on my feet here and have gotten to work, there is a lot of enthusiasm and support for what we're doing.



Cranes and work crews fill the area where the new terminal is going up.

DAN TRITTSCHUH FOR CBF

**Coming from the West to the Midwest, are there differences that stand out?
What things don't change?**

Well, I can tell you no matter where you work in the airport business, every community wants more air service. There are almost 400 commercial service airports and every one of them wants more flights. I've heard it a lot since I got to Columbus. I've heard it everywhere I've ever been.

Now, economies vary. Central Ohio is home to a lot of headquarters and a diversifying economy. I came from a region that was very, very dependent on travel and tourism. Here, it's much more balanced.

Another thing I'm personally adjusting to is the density of airports. In Portland or Reno, people didn't have many choices – the hometown airport was the airport.

I've already heard and see here that people drive to Cincinnati or Cleveland to save \$50, or to Chicago or Detroit for international flights. That's new to me.

Part of my job is to create the best value proposition so people choose to fly from our airports, especially John Glenn.

I don't want folks driving to Cincinnati or Cleveland. We need their business.

Is there something you think differently about today than you did 10 years ago?

Over 30 years as I've risen into executive leadership, I've come to understand the value of our workforce. The biggest asset any airport has is its talent. When you're

in it, it's harder to understand what your greatest resource is. It's clear to me now.

My goal is to lead an organization that is an employer of choice, attract great talent and take great care of customers.

It's easy to get caught up in issues or volatility or money. But it's always about people. Technology, AI, smartphones – all important. But it's still about people