Airlines & Airports

Gate war heats up at O'Hare as traffic roars back to pre-COVID levels

By Miranda Davis and Mary Schlangenstein, Bloomberg

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Credit: Bloomberg

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Travel through Chicago's main airport is close to exceeding pre-pandemic levels, shedding a light on a battle for gates between United Airlines and American Airlines.

Traffic at O'Hare International Airport climbed to a record in July, when more than 8.2 million people landed in or departed Chicago, the city's Department of Aviation said on Wednesday. The number of passengers surged more than 6% in the first seven months

of 2025 from a year earlier, and traffic will soon exceed 2019 levels, according to Joseph Schwieterman, a professor at DePaul University.

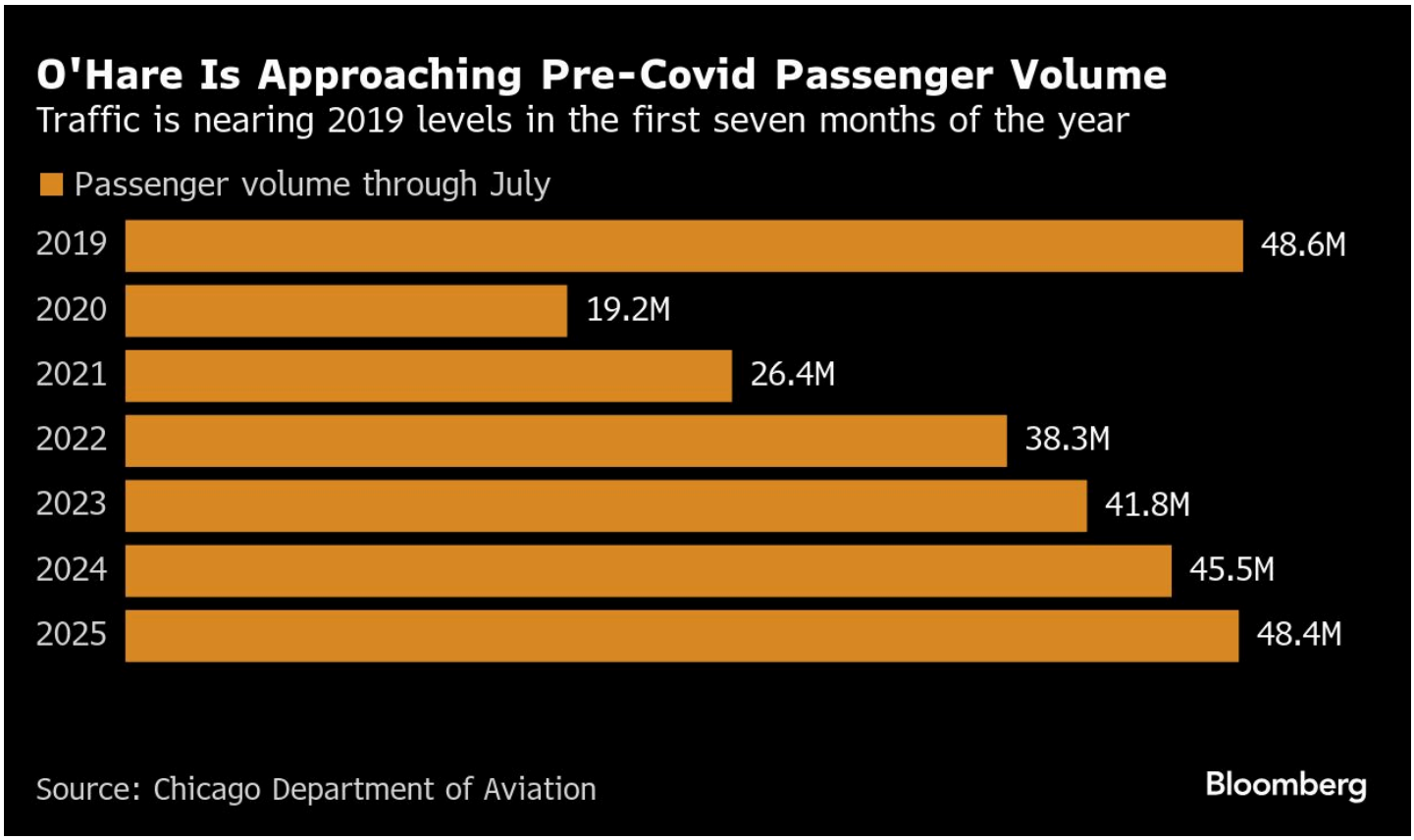
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The surge highlights why American is suing to stop United from taking an additional five gates at O'Hare starting Oct. 1. The Chicago-based airline was awarded the additional space by the city earlier this year, and is moving ahead with scheduling new flights from the gates, said Mark Weithofer, United's managing director of domestic planning.



"American can't afford to let United have overwhelming schedule dominance, so it needs to protect its frequent flyer customer base and that means having comparable

schedules," said Schwieterman. "The battle for market share is as strong as ever."

United and American both use O'Hare as a hub, making it the only dual-hub airport in the US. In April, Chicago awarded United five extra gates after the airline asked the city to review usage earlier in the year. The process will also result in American losing four gates.

American claims that United wants to elbow it out so it can become the "sole hub carrier" of the eighth-busiest airport in the world. The Fort Worth, Texas-based carrier argued the reallocation process was triggered earlier than it should have been, and that it could harm American's competitiveness at the Chicago airport.

More than 48 million million people traveled to or through O'Hare in the first seven months of the year. Traffic is now just 0.6% below 2019 levels.

Aging Infrastructure

For most of the late 20th century, O'Hare ranked as the world's busiest airport. But aging infrastructure and the pandemic hit meant Chicago's hub has fallen behind. While air travel in the US overtook pre-Covid-19 levels in 2023, traffic at O'Hare has taken longer to rebound.

Still, the airport's central location is key, with both United and American using it as a major point for domestic and international connections. While American is seeking an injunction that would effectively halt the reallocation next month, United expects that won't happen.

"We are confident that on Oct. 1, we are going to get five additional gates," United's Weithofer said in an interview last month. "Chicago is naturally set up to be a powerhouse infrastructure transportation hub in the country — none of that is new, the fundamentals have been in place forever. It's just about execution, and for us, we want to take advantage of that."

In an interview last month, Brian Znotins, American's senior vice president of network planning, said that the airline may add more flights if if it prevails in court.

"We don't want to put our customer bookings at risk by speculating on the outcome of the lawsuit," he said. "We've taken a conservative approach, and we've built our schedules starting in October and November and moving forward as though we're not getting the gates."

Airport Revamp

American and United last year reached a deal with Chicago to press ahead with a billion-dollar renovation of O'Hare after months of disagreements over ballooning costs for the project, which was first announced in 2018.

O'Hare's $13.4 billion airport capital program for terminal and airfield projects will require about $9.2 billion in general airport revenue bonds including the ones the city plans to sell this year, according to S&P Global Ratings. The city said it plans to issue about $2.9 billion in bonds for O'Hare through the rest of the year as long as the market is favorable.

"With more than 266,000 travelers passing through O'Hare each day this July, the record-setting traffic underscores why continued investment in our terminal facilities is so essential," Chicago Department of Aviation Commissioner Michael McMurray said in a statement.

By **Miranda Davis and Mary Schlangenstein, Bloomberg**

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