

Bellingham International Airport (IATA: BLI, ICAO: KBLI, FAA LID: BLI) is three miles (5 km) northwest of Bellingham, in Whatcom County, Washington, United States, and the third-largest commercial airport in Washington.[3] BLI covers 2,190 acres (886 ha) of land.[2]

Bellingham is well known as a low-fare alternative airport to the Vancouver International Airport, and an estimated 65% of customers come from Canada.[4][5] It is only 54 miles (87 km) from downtown Vancouver, and only 23 miles (37 km) from the Canadian border, where Greater Vancouver starts. On the Allegiant website the airport is referred to as Bellingham/Vancouver.

## Contents

### 1 History

#### 1.1 Terminal

### 2 Commercial airline service expansion

### 3 General Aviation

### 4 Military Units

### 5 Airlines and destinations

#### 5.1 Passenger

#### 5.2 Cargo

### 6 Statistics

#### 6.1 Passenger numbers

#### 6.2 Top destinations

#### 6.3 Airline market share

### 7 See also

### 8 References

### 9 External links

## History[edit]

In 1936 Whatcom County obtained 200 acres (0.81 km<sup>2</sup>) for an airport at the current airport site. Three runways were planned, but it took almost four years to get the first 5000' x 150' runway cleared and paved. Temporary Port of Entry status was secured early, but the slow construction left it in a continually tenuous state – United Airlines would only base there if the field were safe enough for their DC-3s, and it maintained its Port of Entry status. Ultimately they built a terminal, designed by F. Stanley Piper, and the airport was dedicated in 1940, having employed more than 500 people.

In 1940 the United States Army Corps of Engineers took over the facility and expanded it to three full runways, revetments for parking aircraft, and development of personnel quarters. During World War II the airport was used by Fourth Air Force immediately after the Pearl Harbor Attack for air defense of the Pacific Coast. It was later used by Air Transport Command and Air Technical Service Command as an intermediate ferrying field for Lend-Lease aircraft being flown to Alaska for subsequent transfer to the Soviet Union.

The United States Army Air Forces closed the facility in September 1946, and it was turned over to the War Assets Administration for disposal. It slowly was returned to Whatcom County and was redeveloped as a civil airport in the late 1940s. With the rising costs and need for repairs, Whatcom county sold the Airport to the Port of Bellingham for one dollar

in 1957. Because of costs, the Port of Bellingham could only resurface the longest of the runways (16/34).[6] 16/34 is still the only runway used as it provides adequate year-round wind coverage for aircraft servicing Bellingham. The two diagonal runways have fallen into disrepair, their easternmost ends used as taxiways between tarmacs and the sole remaining runway.

Airline service from Bellingham had a modest beginning. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Harbor Airlines, a commuter air carrier based in Washington, operated nonstop shuttle service to Seattle/Tacoma International Airport with small Britten-Norman Islander twin prop aircraft.[7] By the mid 1980s, Harbor Air had been replaced by San Juan Airlines, a commuter air carrier based in Bellingham which operated shuttle flights to Seattle/Tacoma with Embraer EMB-110 Bandeirante turboprops and Cessna 402 prop aircraft.[8] San Juan Airlines continues to serve the airport at the present time.

In 1985 Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA) initiated Bellingham's first passenger jet service with McDonnell Douglas MD-80s direct to Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco with all PSA flights including a stop at Seattle/Tacoma. PSA was acquired by USAir which continued to serve Bellingham with Boeing 737-300s. Alaska Airlines introduced MD-80 jets in the late 1980s, competing with USAir with both airlines operating nonstop jet service to Seattle/Tacoma and direct one stop service to other destinations. USAir then changed its name to US Airways and eventually merged with American Airlines in 2015; however, by the early 1990s, USAir had ceased serving Bellingham.[9] During the late 1980s, Alaska Airlines was joined by Horizon Air, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Alaska Air Group, with this regional airline flying nonstop service with turboprops to Seattle/Tacoma.[10] Aircraft operated by Horizon Air into the airport over the years included such propjets as the Fairchild Swearingen Metroliner, the de Havilland Canada DHC-8 Dash 8 and the Dornier 328. Horizon Air, which currently operates flights for Alaska Airlines, continues to serve Bellingham at the present time with nonstop service to Seattle/Tacoma flown with the Bombardier Q400 turboprop which is the largest and fastest member of the Dash 8 regional airliner family. Commencing in the late 1980s, United Express was serving the airport with nonstop flights to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on behalf of United Airlines via code sharing agreements with the respective operating air carriers.[11] North Pacific Airlines operated the first United Express flights into Bellingham with British Aerospace BAe Jetstream 31 propjets and were followed by SkyWest Airlines flying as United Express with Embraer EMB-120 Brasilia turboprops. United Express no longer serves Bellingham. In the 1990s homes were purchased to extend the runway in an effort to attract air carriers. The assumption is that there would not be a third runway at Sea-Tac airport. The airport has seen a high turnover rate.

In September 2010 the airport completed a \$26 million resurfacing of the runway to allow aircraft up to the size of Boeing 757s. This project was completed to enable Allegiant Air to operate Boeing 757-200 service nonstop to Hawaii, although this service has since ended.[12] The largest aircraft currently serving Bellingham as of July 2019 are Allegiant Air's Airbus A320 aircraft flying to several destinations on the West Coast.

The airport expanded the terminal building from 27,000 to 85,000 square feet (2,500 to 7,900 m<sup>2</sup>). The first phase added a new gate area with 5 gates. The second phase was built

between 2012 and 2015 and expanded the pre-security areas of the airport and the addition of a baggage carousel for arriving passengers. The cost of the expansion to the terminal building was covered by surcharges from passengers and parking fees.

Terminal[edit]

The current terminal building was built in two phases. The first phase was completed in 1980. The second phase, or the expansion phase, was constructed because of increased passenger volumes and the arrival of new air carriers. In 1985, a separate International Terminal was built to the south in order to accommodate the Federal Inspection Services necessary for international travelers to access the United States; it is connected to the main terminal through a covered walkway. The main terminal is approximately 26,000 square feet and includes three levels, the basement, the ground floor, and the second floor. The basement houses a small storage facility; the ground floor is where the entire passenger processing area is held, and the second floor contains office space. There is one concession stand: Halibut Henry's store where light snacks, coffee drinks, gifts, and sundries are offered. The International Terminal is a one-level building consisting of 4,222 square feet. It serves several functions including the housing of the Federal Inspection Service, FIS offices, and the storage of BLI's Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting equipment.[13]

Commercial airline service expansion[edit]

The early 21st century saw rapid expansion at the Bellingham International Airport from several air carriers operating mainline jet aircraft with these airlines being motivated by the potential passenger loads from lower mainland British Columbia in Canada. Allegiant's commitment to the airport has led to a rapid rise in passenger numbers and the introduction of a number of nonstop destinations served from Bellingham. Other airlines initially recognized the potential of Bellingham International's location and further expanded service into the airport, however all commercial airlines except Alaska and Allegiant have departed as of 2020.

In early 2007 Bellingham International hosted nonstop service to three destinations by the short-lived Western Airlines which was operating Boeing 737-400 jets and was based in Bellingham. Western attempted to establish a small hub at the airport with nonstop service to Ontario, California (ONT), Phoenix, Arizona (via the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, AZA) and San Diego, California (SAN). Later the same year, Skybus Airlines operated nonstop flights to their Columbus, Ohio (CMH) hub with Airbus A319 jetliners but then shut down quickly like Western Airlines had done earlier.

On March 1, 2008, Allegiant Air opened up their sixth base at Bellingham International Airport. The airline currently bases a number of aircraft in Bellingham which serves as a "focus city" for the airline. In 2012 Allegiant announced service to two locations in the Hawaiian islands (Honolulu and Kahului) from Bellingham after receiving ETOPS certification from the FAA for their 757 aircraft. Alaska also entered the market with flights to Honolulu, Kahului and Kona. As of July 2019, both Allegiant and Alaska no longer serve Hawaii from Bellingham.

In September 2010 the airport completed a \$26 million resurfacing of the runway to allow aircraft up to the size of Boeing 757s to utilize the airport.[14] This project was completed in order to serve Allegiant 757 service to Honolulu and Maui which began operations in

November 2012.[12]

In response to the increased low fare competition offered by Allegiant in their home state, Alaska Airlines expanded service from Bellingham International; first adding daily flights to Las Vegas and followed by a daily roundtrip nonstop to Honolulu, both of which are now discontinued. Frontier Airlines announced in early 2012 the addition of a daily seasonal summer service from Bellingham to its main hub in Denver beginning May 2012. Frontier flew Airbus A319 and Embraer ERJ-190 jets from Bellingham but subsequently ceased serving the airport.

The runway and taxiway resurfacing and improvement projects were funded with FAA Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants covering 95% of project costs. In 2010 the FAA contribution towards airport projects was \$27,267,000. The 5% local match came from BLI Passenger Facility Charge accounts. FAA AIP grants also have contributed to the acquisition of additional Airport Rescue Fire Fighting (ARFF) equipment, Aircraft de-ice equipment and other surface projects. The BLI PFC fee per passenger is currently at the FAA mandated maximum of \$4.50 per enplaned passenger. The Terminal and ramp expansion projects are not AIP eligible as they are revenue generating facilities for the airport. The Port of Bellingham issues Revenue Bonds for \$31,719,550 to pay for the terminal expansion. The debt service for the bonds also comes from BLI PFC accounts. In this way, the users of the airport facilities are the ones actually paying for the facility.

General Aviation[edit]

Bellingham International Airport has bustling general aviation activity. Some of which is for the purpose of sightseeing in the San Juan Islands, Victoria in British Columbia, or the Canadian Gulf Islands. The majority of general aviation operations are commercial in nature; charters, flight training, transient, and private business operations provide essential contributions to the economy. It is also a convenient Port of Entry for those flying internationally. General aviation facilities comprise a site of approximately 20 acres south of the passenger terminal facilities. In total there are 73 tie-down spaces; 48 for based aircraft and 25 for transient aircraft. 103 aircraft are sheltered by seven T-hangar and corporate aircraft structures. There is also a terminal building dedicated to general aviation servicing.[13]

Military Units[edit]

The Washington Air National Guard (WANG) occupies a 7.5-acre site at Bellingham International Airport. The Washington Air National Guard is home of the 262nd Combat Communications Squadron. The 262nd's mission is to train and equip combat communications personnel, where they field, install, operate, and maintain Ground Mobile Force communications.[15] In other words, the 262nd equips soldiers with their battlefield communication systems and trains them how to use and maintain the equipment. The WANG base consists of vehicle storage, a headquarters building, a maintenance building, and other miscellaneous storage buildings.

Airlines and destinations[edit]

Passenger[edit]

Airlines Destinations

Alaska Airlines Seattle/Tacoma

Allegiant Air Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Oakland, Palm Springs, Phoenix/Mesa, San Diego

Seasonal: Anchorage, Tucson

San Juan Airlines Eastsound, Friday Harbor, Lopez, Point Roberts

Southwest Airlines Las Vegas, Oakland (both begin November 7, 2021)[16]

San Juan Airlines merged with Northwest Sky Ferries in 2009. This merged airline offers scheduled and charter flights from Bellingham to the San Juan Islands in Washington, Seattle, Tacoma, Port Angeles, Olympia, and British Columbia. San Juan Airlines also serves Bellingham; offering scheduled and charter flights to the San Juan Islands and British Columbia.[13] Northwest Sky Ferry and San Juan airlines offer prop aircraft service with Cessna 206, 207 and 182 airplanes.[17] Southwest Airlines has announced its intentions to serve the airport by operating two daily flights to Oakland, California, & one daily flight to Las Vegas, Nevada, both beginning on November 7, 2021.[18]

show

Destination maps

Cargo[edit]

Airlines Destinations

Ameriflight Seattle–Boeing

FedEx Express Seattle/Tacoma

Statistics[edit]

Passenger numbers[edit]

See source Wikidata query and sources.

Top destinations[edit]

Busiest domestic routes from BLI

(August 2019 - July 2020)[19]

Rank City Passengers Carriers

1 Seattle/Tacoma, Washington 64,910 Alaska

2 Las Vegas, Nevada 62,050 Allegiant

3 Phoenix/Mesa, Arizona 14,960 Allegiant

4 Oakland, California 14,660 Allegiant

5 Palm Springs, California 14,500 Allegiant

6 Los Angeles, California 13,080 Allegiant

7 Tucson, Arizona 4,130 Allegiant

8 Anchorage, Alaska 1,910 Allegiant

Airline market share[edit]

Largest Airlines at BLI (August 2019 - July 2020)[20]

Rank Airline Passengers Share

1 Allegiant Airlines 253,000 67.03%

2 Horizon Air 124,000 32.93%

3 Alaska Airlines 70 0.07%

4 SkyWest Airlines 60 0.02%

See also[edit]

World War II portal

Washington World War II Army Airfields

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