

Cassotis makes three-point landing at PowerBreakfast

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By Christian Morrow



PARTNERS—African American Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Doris Carson Williams and Allegheny County Airport Authority CEO Christina Cassotis at the November PowerBreakfast. (Photo by J.L. Martello)

When Christina Cassotis came here in January as the new CEO of the Allegheny County Airport Authority, one of the first people she met with was African American Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Doris Carson Williams—and it was a productive meeting.

“She set up a workshop with our members right away about doing business at the airport, and walked us through the process,” said Williams. “She hit the ground running with the chamber.”

Cassotis said her focus is threefold—to increase regional traffic and west coast traffic, reestablish lost routes, like those to Memphis, Tenn, Hartford, CT and Cincinnati and establish new international service. She also wants more local business at the airport, like the restaurant opened by Randal Industries owner Greg Spenser, particularly at the airside terminal.

“We have a lot of opportunities at the International and the County airport for minority and small businesses,” she said. “There is nothing that says ‘Pittsburgh’ at the airside terminal, no shops or restaurants. But this city punches way above its weight with art—and we celebrated two installations on the airside by local artists last week.”

The airport also celebrated the announcement of Allegiant Air’s new nonstop flights to New Orleans, La. and Palm Beach, Fl. And expanded service to Myrtle Beach, SC. Nov. 19, one day after announcing Starbucks would open two locations at the airport, one landside and one airside.

“The airport hasn’t kept pace with the region’s renaissance, but it is growing,” Cassotis said. “In 2013, we served 37 locations, now it’s 52. But, before you ask, no, the ‘hub’ is not coming back. The industry has changed.”

Cassotis said at the height of the hub era, Pittsburgh International moved 21 million passengers a year. Now, it moves eight million. On the bright side it means lower costs and fares, but it also

means they have to figure out what to do with a facility that's built for 35 million passengers that only serves eight.

It also means getting a nonstop flight to Europe is that much harder.

"The range of a Boeing 787 is 9,500 nautical miles. So, stick a pin in a map at London, and draw a 9,500-mile circle," she said.

"We're not competing with Cleveland and Latrobe, we're competing with every airport in that circle. Right now, there are 6 international carriers we're talking to—that means there are 45 we're not talking to. I'd say that's pretty focused.

When asked, Cassotis agreed that Pittsburgh International's unused gates could be a draw for big cargo carriers.

"We are talking to them. Cargo is the redheaded stepchild in the industry. They lose money on delays and 'shrinkage,'" she said. "But the trick is you need the multi-modal capabilities—roads, trucks, trains—and the cargo to fill the planes. I think we have it."