

Mann sees new horizons, familiar challenges at CAE (Columbia Business Regional Report)

It was Dan Mann's wife who first warmed to the idea of moving to Columbia. Mann, then Director of the Cedar Rapids, Iowa Airport, had been contacted by a search firm trying to find a new top executive for the Columbia Metropolitan Airport. Mann wasn't looking for a new position at the time, so his first instinct was not to jump at the possibility.

His wife, Melissa, decided to check Google, Mann said. She quickly was drawn to pictures of Columbia Metro's eye-catching architecture and the possibility of living in a community with a state university, perhaps on Lake Murray. Also, central South Carolina gets a bit less snow than eastern Iowa.

"You ought to check this out," his wife told him.

Now Columbia Metro's new Executive Director, Mann is trying to grow the airport's customer base and number of flights. He's hoping that some of those same attractions that brought him to the area will help him boost air service here.

Cedar Rapids' airport is similar to Columbia Metro in number of flights and passengers, so Mann already is familiar with the challenges that come with keeping and improving air service. Relationships with airlines can take a lot of cultivation, Mann said, and must be nurtured through turnover. You can talk to someone regularly for two years about getting better service to your airport, Mann said, and then have to start over as that person leaves and a new person takes the job.

One of the challenges of his job, Mann said, is that he's not in control of much of the passengers' experience. He plans to make the case to airlines that lower fares will bring more customers, letting them keep travelers' business throughout their trip, not just for a connecting leg. But actually making that change is up to the airlines.

"I'm held accountable for things that I don't have any control over," Mann said.

The position definitely has its rewards, though. More than anything, it's not dull, Mann said. There always are new issues for an airport manager to deal with and new problems to overcome.

"There's something new every day," he said. "I don't know that I can recall a day in this job when I was bored."

A reward of his new post: overseeing the airport facility.

"This facility is absolutely spectacular," Mann said. "It is something that Columbia, the entire region can be proud of."

That's not just cosmetic, Mann said. It advertises the community well to possible investment.

"It's the first things that prospective clients, businesses might see, he said.

Mann also has a staff of about 120 to manage. That's quite a bit larger than airports of similar size, he said, based on his own experience and a survey he conducted of other facilities.

In fact, it was nearly twice the size of other airports he surveyed. But that doesn't mean layoffs are coming, he said. Standard attrition – people retiring or taking other jobs – will reduce the numbers. And, for example, the airport might assign staff members to jobs that are currently being contracted out.

The point, he said, is that the airport must become more efficient, because that will mean it can charge lower fees to the airlines. That would be an incentive for them to bring more and larger planes to Columbia, he said. It also might persuade more folks to fly from here, instead of driving to Charlotte, the nation's 13th largest airport, just up the interstate.

Mann's goal is the same as that of airport executives everywhere: Keep the service that the airport has now and try to gain more. But Mann said he believes he has a facility and a community in Columbia that more people should want to visit.