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O'Hare making room for giant Airbus jet

Lufthansa to start A380 service in '08

By Mark Skertic
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It will be a tight fit, but O'Hare International Airport is preparing for the arrival of the gargantuan Airbus A380, which typically will carry 555 passengers.

German airline Lufthansa plans to fly Airbus' new superjumbo between Chicago and Frankfurt beginning in late 2008. That gives O'Hare time to prepare for the double-decker aircraft.

Accommodating aircraft the size of the A380 is part of the O'Hare runway expansion plan, but those changes likely are years away. City aviation officials have anticipated the need to have room for the A380 with the airport as currently configured.

"We do not expect any issues whatsoever," said Wendy Abrams, an airport spokeswoman.

O'Hare meets the 10,000-foot-long runway requirement, has adequate gate space and operates a baggage-handling system that can accommodate the needs of such a large aircraft, Abrams said.

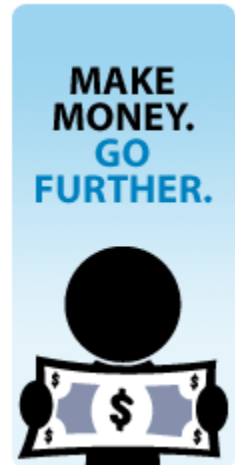
The only issue is taxiways, which the Federal Aviation Administration says must be 100 feet wide for the A380. O'Hare's are 75 feet wide, but the airport is proposing modifications to that standard. The FAA has not issued final rules regarding the aircraft.

To make room for the King Kong of commercial carriers, Chicago aviation officials are planning to use two gates for each arrival and departure. The planes, which can hold up to 850 passengers, have two entryways, so two passenger bridges will be used to enter or exit the plane.

Lufthansa's planned once-daily A380 flight will arrive at Terminal 5, the international terminal, to unload passengers. The return flight will depart from Terminal 1, now dedicated to United, where passengers will board the plane. United partner Lufthansa already has space in the terminal, which it uses for its three daily departures from Chicago.

The A380 flight likely will replace an existing Chicago-Frankfurt flight, said Armin Catrina, Lufthansa's general manager for operations and airport services in North and South America. The airline flies daily between the two cities with a Boeing 747-400. A second daily departure to Frankfurt will resume in the spring.

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Lufthansa plans to begin flying the A380 in the United States in late 2007 or early 2008, with service from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, he said.

"No final decisions have been made because there is so much activity going on to get airports ready, to get facilities ready" for the supersize aircraft, Catrina said. "We'll firm up the list of destinations in the second half of next year when we have a clearer picture of things."

Airbus has said the A380 will be a way to carry more passengers without adding additional flights. Singapore Airlines is set to take the first delivery of the A380 in late 2006. The airline plans to use it for service to London.

The aircraft lists for about \$290 million each, although discounts can apply depending on contract terms. Airbus has orders for 149 of the aircraft.

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