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## O'Hare regains No. 1 title

By John McCormick  
Tribune staff reporter

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After falling behind Atlanta last year for both total flights and passengers, Chicago again holds the distinction of having the world's busiest airport—at least for flights—during the first six months of this year.

O'Hare International Airport recorded 477,001 takeoffs and landings through June, putting it slightly ahead of Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson, even though both airports saw modest declines from a year ago, according to Federal Aviation Administration data released Monday.

The declines came amid an increasingly competitive environment where airlines are reducing the frequency of flights to fill more seats as they seek to reduce fuel and labor costs. Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines also is focusing more on international flights as it works to restructure after its bankruptcy filing last fall.

Through the first six months of this year, O'Hare saw a 1.3 percent decline in flight traffic from a year earlier, and Hartsfield-Jackson was down 5 percent, to 472,431, the FAA reported. Traffic at the nation's No. 3 airfield, Dallas-Ft. Worth, fell 2.1 percent to 348,434.

"Given the strength of the O'Hare market, it is no surprise that O'Hare is back on top," said Chicago Department of Aviation spokeswoman Wendy Abrams. "The city is committed to maintaining Chicago's role as the preeminent aviation market. We look forward to adding much-needed capacity to keep pace with expected demand."

Chicago's Midway Airport, where Southwest Airlines has a large presence, saw traffic increase 3.1 percent, recording 145,377 flights and ranking 28th nationally. Passenger volume at the Southwest Side airport through May was 7.3 million, up 13.5 percent from a year ago.

Although O'Hare moved into the top spot for total flights, Atlanta easily remained ahead for passengers this year, according to figures provided by both airports Monday. From January through May, Atlanta handled 34.2 million passengers, and O'Hare had 30.6 million.

Last year, Atlanta topped O'Hare in both total flights and passengers, the first time Chicago's top airport fell to No. 2 in both categories. The change in rankings followed a November 2004 imposition of flight caps at O'Hare as the FAA sought to reduce delays.

For almost half a century, O'Hare held the undisputed title of world's busiest airport, taking over the bragging rights from Midway Airport at the dawn of the Jet Age. But in 1998, Atlanta surpassed O'Hare in total passengers. And in 1999, another first occurred as more planes landed and took off in Atlanta

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than in Chicago.

But with heavy traffic come delays, as almost any O'Hare frequent flier can attest. In 2005 O'Hare finished 31st for departures among the top 33 airports, with an on-time average of 74 percent. Atlanta finished 32nd, with 73 percent of departures on time.

During the first half of 2006, Atlanta's biggest drop in flights was among large jets, a category that dropped 12.2 percent. O'Hare saw a slight increase in large jets, traffic that represents about two-thirds of the airport's flights.

Flights by small jets, including regional jets, were down 6 percent at O'Hare, and Atlanta saw a 14 percent increase in that traffic. The smaller planes typically carry 35 to 70 passengers and have become popular among carriers serving smaller regional markets such as Des Moines, Milwaukee and Grand Rapids, Mich.

"The traditional carriers are making strategic decisions in terms of their fleet usage," said Felicia Browder, a spokeswoman for the Atlanta airport. "They are trying to maximize the capacity they have."

Browder said the Atlanta airport recently opened a fifth runway to handle expected growth. She said some of the recent decline in flights there could be attributed to changes being made by Delta.

"Delta Air Lines is using international route expansion as their 'X factor' to be profitable again," she said. "As they ramp up their international and ramp down their domestic, it will take a little bit of time until we see the passenger traffic rebound on the international side."

*mccormickj@tribune.com*

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