



COLUMBIA
REGIONAL AIRPORT

Master Plan Update

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COLUMBIA REGIONAL AIRPORT: CONNECTING MID-MISSOURI TO THE WORLD

Columbia Regional Airport (COU) is a Part 139 certificated commercial service airport serving the aviation needs of Columbia and the Mid-Missouri region. COU offers daily nonstop flights to key hubs such as Chicago O’Hare (ORD), Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW), and Denver (DEN), with new service to Charlotte-Douglas (CLT) set to launch in June 2026. The airport also provides comprehensive services for a diverse array of private and corporate aircraft.

In 2022, the City of Columbia inaugurated a 52,000-square-foot passenger terminal designed to enhance the passenger experience and support the region's long-term air transportation needs. This modern facility is equipped with expanded capacity for multiple airlines, an optimized Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screening area, and three active boarding gates with integral infrastructure to facilitate future expansion. The terminal also includes a comprehensive baggage claim system and a selection of updated concessionaires and dining establishments.

OVERVIEW OF AIRPORT OPERATIONS AND SAFETY MEASURES

As an all-weather facility, Columbia Regional Airport (COU) operates a two-runway system consisting of a 7,401-foot primary runway (2-20) and a 5,500-foot crosswind runway (13-31). This infrastructure supports more than 38,000 annual operations, accommodating aircraft ranging from light, single-engine planes to commercial Boeing 737 and Airbus A319 jets. Advanced navigational aids enhance safety during inclement weather, permitting landings in visibility as low as a half-mile.

The airport's on-site Airport Rescue and Firefighting (ARFF) facility, located adjacent to the passenger terminal, ensures immediate response capabilities for any incidents or emergencies. The station is equipped with specialized crash, fire, and rescue vehicles and is staffed by full-time professional firefighters. Upcoming improvements will bring the facility into full compliance with current building and safety codes, creating a more functional environment for the ARFF team.



PASSENGER ENPLANEMENT TRENDS AND FORECASTS AT COLUMBIA REGIONAL AIRPORT

In 2024, the Columbia Regional Airport was the fourth-busiest commercial airport in Missouri, recording 103,000 passenger enplanements. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Airport experienced record growth, with 128,000 annual passenger enplanements. When the pandemic hit, enplanements plummeted to 50,000 passengers. COU has experienced a strong recovery, with annual year-over-year increases averaging 17 percent, resulting in 95,000 enplanements in 2023.

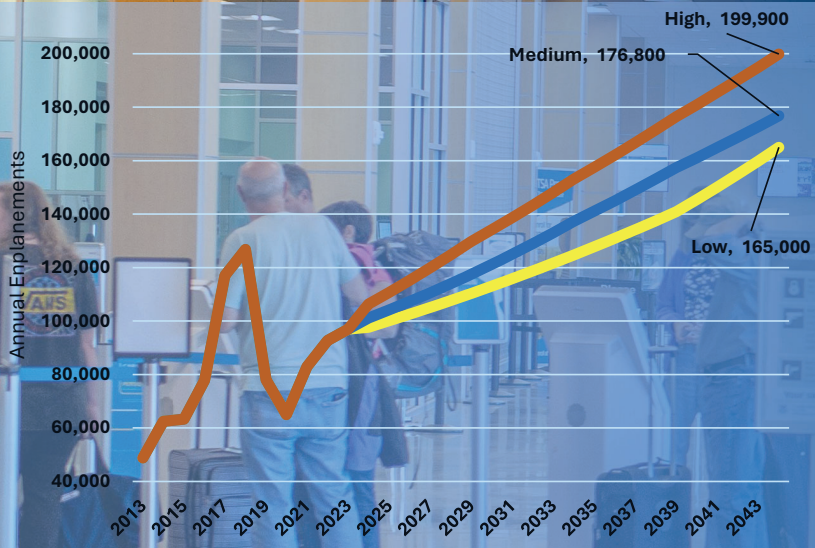


Figure 1 Passenger Enplanement Forecasts

Passenger forecasts (Figure 1) developed for this study indicate COU is on track to surpass its pre-COVID-19 peak in the next few years. Continued growth is expected, driven primarily by the addition of new airlines and nonstop designations. Under the preferred medium-growth scenario, annual enplanements are projected to reach 176,000 by 2043. However, with carrier-recruitment efforts, the airport could achieve and exceed the projections sooner.

A POWERFUL ENGINE FOR REGIONAL PROSPERITY

Airports are significant contributors to their communities' economic health, and the Columbia Regional Airport is a prime example. While a 2012 MoDOT Aviation Economic Impact Study already quantified the airport's value at \$87.1 million in annual economic output and 745 local jobs, the airport's role as a key driver of economic activity has accelerated dramatically since then.

Demonstrating this momentum, COU continues to break records and attract new investment. The airport marked a historic milestone in October 2025 with an all-time high of 14,202 passenger enplanements. This surge in traffic is supported by substantial commitments from airline partners, including a 26 percent capacity increase from American Airlines and the reintroduction of daily United Airlines flights to major hubs in Chicago and Denver. The airport's future looks even brighter, with Allegiant Airlines scheduled to begin service to Florida in June 2026, poised to drive further customer growth and revenue for the entire Mid-Missouri region.





FULL-SERVICE AVIATION CAPABILITIES

Columbia Regional Airport (COU) is a premier aviation facility with the proven capacity to handle large-scale aircraft, including the Airbus A320 series and Boeing 737, 757, and 767 models. This capability is regularly demonstrated through our facilitation of NCAA collegiate team charters. In addition to these large passenger jets, the airport consistently services a diverse mix of aviation operations arriving from destinations across the country, including commercial, private, and corporate aircraft supporting air travel, local businesses, and college game day activities.

Comprehensive ground support for all aircraft, regardless of size, is expertly delivered by the Columbia Jet Center. Our full-service fixed-base operator provides professional fueling, maintenance, and hangarage, ensuring the highest standards of service are maintained for every operation.

STRATEGIC AIR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND MARKET EXPANSION



FIGURE 2 PASSENGER SURVEYS

In a strategic effort to capture a larger share of the regional air service market, COU continuously seeks opportunities to expand its services to meet passenger demand. Analysis of passenger surveys from 2024 highlighted a strong demand for routes to Denver, Boston, and Atlanta, the top three destinations not served by COU at the time.

Since then, the Airport has reinstated its pre-pandemic service to Denver and will inaugurate a new route to Charlotte-Douglas International Airport later in 2026. COU remains proactive in adding new service routes for the Airport, offering a greater selection for its local community. This strategic approach enhances COU's competitive position, allowing it to capture a greater share of the regional market from passengers who might otherwise depart from St. Louis or Kansas City.



AIRPORT CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Table 2 Airport Capital Improvement Program

Year	Improvement	Project Cost
2024	Rehabilitate RW 2-20 – Design	\$273,800
2024	Rehabilitate RW 2-20 – Construction	\$2,474,082
2025	Phase I Terminal Parking (West Parking Lot)	\$1,534,264
2025	Airport Drive Rehabilitation (Rte H – USPS)	\$2,000,000
2026	Terminal Building Loop Road	\$716,727
2026	Glycol Recovery System	\$1,488,186
2026	SRE Building – Design	\$486,063
2026	RW 31 Extension - Environmental Assessment	\$288,750
2027	SRE Building – Construction	\$7,499,259
2027	Acquire Snow Removal Equipment – Broom	\$1,327,337
2027	Passenger Boarding Bridge	\$1,297,758
2028	Acquire Snow Removal Equipment - Runway Tow De-icer	\$103,484
2028	Acquire a Snow Removal Equipment - Blower	\$1,267,151
2028	RW 31 Extension - Land Acquisition (101 Acres)	\$2,020,000
2028	RW 31 Extension - ATC Site Selection Programming, Environmental, and Design	\$600,000
2028	Rehabilitate South Apron Area 3 - Design Only(Between A2 & A3)	\$352,411
Short-Term Program Total:		\$23,729,272

The Airport Capital Improvement Program (ACIP) categorizes projects as new improvements or recurring maintenance. New improvements include pavements, facilities, services, and equipment, as well as the reconstruction or rehabilitation of pavements to address airport safety concerns or increase capacity. Recurring maintenance projects are essential for maintaining facilities in a safe, functional, and serviceable condition.

Short-term projects (detailed with cost estimates in Table 2) focus on repairing aging airfield pavements, improving parking lots, and correcting existing facility deficiencies while laying the groundwork for larger initiatives planned over the next 6 to 20 years. Major projects include realignment of Airport Drive, construction of a new ARFF facility, expanded parking facilities, and new hangar development. Notably, several of the short-term projects were already underway when this study was published. The airport’s overall future development improvements are illustrated in Figure 3.



AIRPORT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Access to the National Airspace System is considered a fundamental element of the nation's transportation and infrastructure network. However, funding large capital improvement projects at the airport is typically beyond the airport sponsor's capability. The Airport Improvement Program (AIP) is a federal funding mechanism designed to support the development of a national airport system that meets the nation's needs. Funding for the AIP is generated from aviation-related excise taxes on airline passengers, cargo, and fuel.

In other words, these funds are generated FROM aviation to be spent ON aviation and airport improvements.

The FAA administers the AIP Program using a priority system to allocate funds to airports on a competitive basis. Airport sponsors who receive AIP funds also accept the conditions and obligations associated with the grant assurances, which are designed to ensure the airport operates and is maintained in a safe and serviceable condition.

INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

The Columbia Regional Airport secures federal funding for eligible projects through the Airport Improvement Program (AIP) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), targeting enhancements to airport safety, security, capacity, and environmental sustainability. Projects that do not meet these criteria may require local or private funding.

The City of Columbia's collaboration with the Federal Aviation Administration ensures these improvements are allocated efficiently. This partnership ensures a safe and reliable facility that meets the aviation needs of the Mid-Missouri region and reinforces the airport's commitment to delivering quality aviation services for years to come.

