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Clouds clear at DuPage Airport

Airports and controversy seem to run together in Illinois, from the battle for expansion of O'Hare International Airport to Mayor Richard Daley's after-midnight raid that closed Meigs Field, to the backlash against building runways on farm fields in Peotone and to the political battles that have circled DuPage Airport.

But even DuPage residents might not know much about the management turnaround that, while long overdue, has occurred in recent years at the airfield in West Chicago, according to a new study co-authored by Paul Green of Roosevelt University.



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Getting Around

For years, DuPage Airport was among the most poorly run government agencies tagged with well-deserved reputations for corruption, political patronage and insider deals, the history reflects.

Punching a time clock at the airport was an easy gig if you had the connections to get hired. Credentials were not important. Former airport directors have included a forest ranger, a commercial artist and a police officer. If any of the staff of 61 airport employees worked overtime, they received triple pay on top of their already generous benefits.

Meanwhile, the DuPage Airport Authority was a drain on the county, levying up to \$18 million from taxpayers each year and grappling with bond debt that reached \$23 million.

Not anymore. A new leadership instituted changes starting in 2002. Today, the airport is still not totally free of controversy.

Before he left office last year, former DuPage County Board Chairman Robert Schillerstrom accused airport officials of "protecting their little fiefdom" under the leadership of Daniel Goodwin, chairman of the DuPage Airport Authority.

Despite the criticism, or because of it, Goodwin, who is also chairman of Inland Real Estate Group, felt confident that strong progress has been made toward running the airport like a disciplined business, and that it was unfair the old reputation of politics as usual still hung over the airport.

Goodwin recently took the risk of commissioning two academics, Green, a political scientist, and Peter Creticos of the Institute for Work and the Economy, to dive into the airport books to conduct a thorough review.

Goodwin predicted they would find "an airport turned around from a political animal to a business operation."



DuPage Airport Executive Director David Bird, left, and authority Chairman Daniel Goodwin have helped the suburban agency shed its poor reputation. ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHOTO

That's what they found.

Airport Executive Director David Bird was an assistant director at the airport in Colorado Springs in 2004 when he was hired by DuPage. Airport staffing has been cut by 15 percent. Positions were consolidated, and benefits were reduced.

"But nobody was upset enough to quit," Goodwin said. "I also put the word out that no politically sponsored employees would be hired."

The airport authority's current tax levy has been chopped, to \$6 million annually, and the airport has abated \$500,000 in each of the last two years. The \$23 million in debt has been erased, officials said.

"The remarkable story of the (DuPage Airport Authority) is that it systematically developed a well-deserved reputation as a reliable steward of the public trust despite Illinois' continued reputation of government mismanagement and corruption," Green and Creticos wrote.

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