

Rockford approaching cargo airport top 20

By Thomas V. Bona

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ROCKFORD — Chicago/Rockford International Airport is on the verge of being one of the country's top 20 cargo airports.

According to preliminary numbers released Tuesday by the Federal Aviation Administration, Rockford ended 2006 as at least the 21st largest cargo airport in the country, up from 25th in 2005. When the final numbers come out this fall, the airport could be as high as 20th.

Rockford is also the 220th largest passenger airport, up from 226th at the end of 2005.

Rockford's cargo ranking went up despite the overall numbers going slightly down. The airport had 1.39 billion pounds of landed weight in 2006, down less than one percent from 2005's record year.

But through May, the cargo numbers this year are 12 percent higher than last year. UPS has a major hub here, and DHL and BAX Global also use Rockford.

"2007 could be another record year for RFD," said Mike Dunn, chairman of the Greater Rockford Airport Authority board of directors.

Rockford passed airports in Minneapolis, Houston, Cincinnati and Atlanta, Rockford is the second-largest cargo airport in Illinois, behind Chicago O'Hare International Airport.

The airport's board of directors will discuss a development deal Thursday and, in past months, officials have said they're meeting with companies to build additional cargo facilities here.

Rockford's passenger totals increased just over 9 percent from 2005 to 2006, and the airport passed ones in Helena, Mont.; Casper, Wy.; and College Station, Texas; among others.

Of the 219 airports ahead of Rockford, only 19 grew at a faster rate.

In comparison, Chicago Midway International Airport grew just more than 6 percent, Quad City International grew about 5 percent and O'Hare and Milwaukee's General Mitchell International Airport increased less than 1 percent.

The airports in Madison, Peoria, Champaign-Urbana and Springfield all decreased in passenger service in 2006.

Central Illinois Regional Airport at Bloomington-Normal grew faster than Rockford, with a 12 percent increase.

Rockford is the 7th largest passenger airport in Illinois, behind the Chicago, Quad City, Bloomington, Peoria and Champaign/Urbana airports.

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