

Eastern Iowa Airport forced to pause health screening plan

Passenger numbers remain well below pre-pandemic levels as airport recovers from storm damage



Travelers walk toward the rental car desks and baggage claim area at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids in April. (Andy Abeyta/The Gazette)

CEDAR RAPIDS — The Eastern Iowa Airport halted development of its health screening program because of changes in Federal Aviation Administration rules, airport Director Marty Lenss said.

The program, approved by the airport commission last month, [was intended to screen all outgoing passengers using medical personnel from Mercy Medical Center.](#)

But a change in FAA rules means the Cedar Rapids airport cannot use funding from the CARES Act or airport revenue for the project. The Eastern Iowa Airport was planning on using 3 percent of its CARES funding for the project.

“You have higher levels of health screenings walking through most salons for your haircut than you do coming into the sterile area of the terminal,” Lenss said. “We really want to see a reversal to get us back on track.”

FAA regulations prohibit airports from screening inbound passengers, Lenss said.

“We really threaded the needle to be very much in line with the FAA’s decision,” Lenss said.

Many area businesses, Lenss said, were looking forward to the screening program. The added level of precautions would’ve meant less risk for employees when business travel resumes.

“As we try to get the traveling public back in the air, it’s what they want to see,” Lenss said.

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Lenss has reached out to Iowa’s congressional delegation in Washington, D.C. He said they’ve been receptive to his request and made calls to the FAA office, but it’s unclear whether that will bring about a change.

“I know some calls have gone in to the FAA headquarters,” Lenss said. “That process is still working its way through. ... It’s too early to tell.”

As the airport waits to learn if the FAA will change its policy about funding sources, its initial early September target date is unrealistic. Lenss said he’s optimistic the airport can have the program “up and running” in 60 to 90 days.

An FAA spokesman did not immediately reply for comment.

Other safety measures, [including the mask mandate](#), remain in effect.

In the meantime, air travel remains “a far cry” from a usual summer. In July, passenger traffic was down 69 percent from 2019 levels. Delta Air Lines saw passenger numbers drop 90 percent from July 2019 to July of this year.

“What we’re not seeing a lot of yet is that all-important business traffic getting back traveling again,” Lenss said.

The 38,612 enplaned passengers in July were the most for The Eastern Iowa Airport since March.

Lenss said “time will tell” whether American Airlines’s suspension of flights from Dubuque Regional Airport will translate into more American traffic at the Cedar Rapids airport.

The Eastern Iowa Airport also is dealing with between \$500,000 and \$725,000 in storm damage from the Aug. 10 derecho.