

THE
ECONOMIC
CLUB OF
CHICAGO

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The Club was honored to host Chicago Department of Aviation Commissioner Ginger S. Evans for the First Forum of the program year held at The Chicago Club on September 29. Commissioner Evans shared the most recent iteration of O'Hare 21, an investment and development plan for O'Hare International Airport.

"We know that significant changes are needed at O'Hare to protect its future," said Commissioner Evans. "The good news is that the program comes at no cost to tax payers and we'll employ thousands of people in the future."

The Commissioner shared many ways O'Hare is uniquely positioned for growth, noting first that its central location in the United States means it can more efficiently serve passengers around the world compared to other US gateway airports. However, from 2005 to 2015, O'Hare lost international passengers, while other gateway airports saw a sharp increase ranging from 30 percent at Los Angeles' LAX to 120 percent at Miami's MIA.

"I think it's because we haven't invested in our international facilities in a very long time," said Commissioner Evans. "International Terminal Five is remote from [terminals] one, two and three. So if you arrive international, you depart, you have to get on the train, you rescreen for your domestic flight; very inconvenient. It's very much a disadvantage."

Commissioner Evans emphasized that making flight connections easier for passengers and airlines is an important strategic consideration when considering the layout of terminals.

"If [global alliances] can co-locate, it reduces the amount of facilities we have to build because they're co-utilizing it; it's a more efficient use of capital. And much more efficient both for the passengers and for the people who are managing those air crafts."

The plan is also an opportunity to engage community partners in the development of O'Hare. With every job created at the airport, two more are created in indirect and induced services. For that reason, Commissioner Evans sees these investments in O'Hare as a boon for the Chicago economy.

After her presentation, Commissioner Evans took live questions from the audience, moderated by the Club's Second Vice Chair Elizabeth Connelly.

When a member asked what the Chicago business community can do to help the initiative, Commissioner Evans emphasized support.

"I think we do need your backing. We need to convince the rest of the Chicago that the timing for this investment is critical and we're all going to benefit from an improved O'Hare," she said.

One member asked what security at O'Hare will look like in five years.

"Ideally what we're all striving for is walk-through technology for as many passengers as possible and that is only possible if people are willing to share data with the government about themselves," she said, referring to pre-checks and global entry registration. "Also, K9 teams. Huge ramp up in the use of K9 teams, which are absolutely superb and they do the work."

Another member questioned which airports O'Hare was truly competing against for international regard: other U.S. airports, or sophisticated airports in cities like Singapore, Shanghai and Dubai. Commissioner Evans explained that those federally-funded airports are meant to serve as icons of the national government and focus heavily on luxury shopping.

"That's one model, but that's not our model, that's not how Americans are wired and that's not how our financial system is set up," she said. "I tell you, being first in the U.S. is being first internationally."

The final question that morning came from a member curious to know, "where is Terminal Four?"

Commissioner Evans answered, to laughs in the crowd.

"Terminal Four has had a peaceful retirement on the ground level of the parking garage," she said. "Sometime I'll get the mayor for two minutes and rename everything. Terminal Five, I'll let him give that a new name, but your point is well taken."