

EXPRESS LANE

Plan aims to reduce airport security hassles

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Published on: 07/16/07

A program that promises to let paying passengers breeze through security gates without taking off their shoes — and possibly their overcoats — will be tested at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport by fall.

Airport General Manager Ben DeCosta said the airport in "a few weeks" will solicit proposals from private companies to test the "registered traveler" program at the world's busiest airport, a trial run that will be closely watched by the aviation industry nationwide.

Essentially, vendors selling the program charge travelers about \$100 a year for a faster-paced, hassle-reduced trip through airport security. It is primarily aimed at business travelers, and requires an extensive background check by the Transportation Security Administration as well as a high-tech card that contains fingerprint and other unique biometric data.

"There may be a proposal where you set aside a lane for registered-traveler members, and it would actually help everybody," DeCosta said. "It remains to be seen."

DeCosta said he is open to the idea of creating a designated lane for the program, but will wait until he sees all the proposals from private companies before commenting on specifics. He said the program, which he hopes will shorten public security lines by removing thousands of passengers, will be evaluated after a year to determine if it is a keeper.

Hartsfield-Jackson officials attempt to keep security wait times to 15 minutes or less. However, during the summer travel season those numbers can double or triple, especially during peak travel hours on Mondays and Fridays. Last Friday afternoon, security wait times were listed at 20 to 30 minutes on the airport's Web site.

The company that runs a registered traveler program at nine airports across the nation will propose a Hartsfield-Jackson lane with special shoe-scanning equipment that allows travelers to keep their shoes on. **Steven Brill, CEO of Verified Identity Pass Inc.**, said his company's CLEAR program is also testing equipment that will let passengers retain their coats — equipment he hopes to have in place by Labor Day. CLEAR runs airport programs at JFK International, San Jose, Indianapolis, Little Rock, Newark, Westchester, Albany (N.Y.) and Cincinnati.

Unisys Corp. last month launched registered traveler lanes at Reno-Tahoe International Airport, its first airport operation. Unisys spokeswoman Lisa Meyer said the company has signed up "several hundred" Reno customers in its first month of operation and plans to bid on the Hartsfield-Jackson program.

Brill's company, meanwhile, wants to triple the number of airports where it is operating within a few years. Experts agree that a successful run at a huge hub like Hartsfield-Jackson could fast-track the program nationwide.

Brill's company has about 35,000 people signed up for the CLEAR program at Orlando International Airport, where it has been in operation for two years and has reduced the security procedure to about five minutes for most customers, he said. CLEAR has more than 50,000 subscribers nationwide.

"Atlanta is much more of a business traveler's market than Orlando," **Brill** said. "We think five years out we'd have 200,000 people in the program in Atlanta."

Delta Air Lines, which already has special lanes at Hartsfield-Jackson to speed its medallion and first-class passengers to the front of the security line, is dubious. Delta books about 70 percent of the airport's flights.

"From what we've seen, where this has been tested at other airports, it doesn't offer the level of benefit people expect," said Delta spokesman Kent Landers. "It would result in increased wait times for most customers, and could result in the elimination of dedicated lines for premium customers."

Officials at Orlando's airport said they do not keep statistics about how their two designated register-traveler security gates have impacted wait times at their public security gates. But they said that — anecdotally, at least — the program seems to be working.

"Our experience is that it works like express lanes on a toll road," Orlando International spokeswoman Carolyn Fennell said. "Those in the express lanes clear up the other lanes for everyone else."

Landers stressed that passengers using the registered traveler program will still have to run their laptop computers, keys and other items through the X-ray scanners. DeCosta said he plans to review proposals for the program with airline representatives before implementing the test program.

Patti Morgan, a Marietta resident who owns a construction company and flies three times a month from Hartsfield-Jackson on business, said she'd be interested in the program.

"I never fly on Mondays and Fridays now because of congestion in the security lines," she said. "If I could clear security in five minutes and it would cost me \$100 a year, I'd do it for sure."

Stuart Rapee, a Miami lawyer, who signed up for the CLEAR program in Orlando where his company headquarters is located, said it takes him about four minutes to clear security.

"The people in the [dedicated] lines seem to know what they are doing," he said. "I haven't had much delay at all."

Rapee said the main benefit to the program is that it allows him to predict how long it will take him to get through security. Before, he said, he had to arrive at the airport much earlier because he had to anticipate a worst-case wait time.

The program's main drawback, he said, is that it's not yet available at most airports.

"It's mildly frustrating now to have it work so well on some trips and then not find it in airports on other trips," he said.