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Charleston airport rushes to complete kitchen, customs before 1st international flight

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Workers prepare the new 15,000-square-foot kitchen for Charleston International Airport's international flights, which British Airways will launch April 4. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

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In a former cavernous auto shop at Charleston International Airport, walls now create new food preparation and storage rooms, walk-in refrigerators and freezers line the walls and a 35-foot dishwasher awaits its first load of dirty plates and glasses.

The new 15,000-square-foot kitchen is one of two main construction projects the airport is rushing to complete for the Lowcountry's first nonstop, transatlantic flight early next month.

The other is the overhaul of the seldom-used federal inspection station where U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents will greet incoming passengers.

British Airways will launch twice-weekly service between Charleston and London for the first time ever starting April 4. Local airport officials say they will be ready.

"The most important thing is finishing on time because we have flights coming in that are already booked," airport CEO Paul Campbell said. "There is no backup plan. The backup plan is to be finished."

On a visit to the two sites three weeks before the first flight, crews were busy installing ceiling tiles, welding parts and hauling around the final pieces over debris-strewn floors.

Joey Baker, site superintendent with Hill Construction of Charleston, said the work areas will look totally different when the first flight takes off.

"We will be 99 percent complete on April 4," Baker said.

Arriving passengers may see a few touch-ups that are still needed, but for the most part the U.S. Customs and Border Protection station will be ready.

The little-known federal inspection station behind the existing baggage carousels is being renovated with modern technology and equipment and new bathrooms, flooring and side rooms.

Several offices being added for customs agents won't be completed until mid-summer, but that work will be in an area that won't interfere with arriving passengers, Campbell said.

The kitchen, built in a building beside the airport's police department away from the terminal, will not be seen by the public, but Campbell said it, too, will be ready with champagne, dry goods and 450 meals to put on the plane when it pulls up to the gate.

"All of the equipment has been tested and is operational," said airport deputy director Hernan Pena. "We received our certificate of occupancy on March 15."

The kitchen and customs upgrades aren't coming cheap, either. Campbell put the price tag north of \$10 million, paid for by Charleston County Aviation Authority, which owns and operates the airport.

The pace of construction, which started in December to get the customs area and the new kitchen ready, has been going seven days a week and into the night to meet the approaching flight deadline.

"We've had an awesome team of contractors and engineers," Pena said. "The work has been seamless."

The kitchen alone required 105 pieces of equipment, from coolers and dishwashers to stoves and cooking utensils.

The addition of the kitchen also opens up other possibilities for the airport as some existing airlines may want to tap into the meal service or new carriers look to Charleston.

"This puts us in a good position to attract other international carriers," Pena said.

Starting out, the kitchen and its 25 employees will prepare less than 1,000 meals per week for the two flights per week, but it has the capacity to produce 10,000 meals a day.

"We didn't just put it in for British Airways," Campbell said as he and Pena darted around ladders and construction materials in the developing kitchen.



Several refrigeration units are being added inside the new 15,000-square-foot kitchen that will serve new international flights leaving Charleston International Airport starting April 4. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

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Once the food preparation and storage area is completed, British Airways will perform a dry run or “ghost flight” to make sure everything is OK before the first flight from Charleston.

The airport also bought three refrigerated catering trucks to ferry meals on the less than one-mile journey to the airplane.

Customs officials also are expected to simulate an arriving flight ahead of time at the reworked inspection area to make sure there are no last-minute glitches.

The federal inspection station hasn’t been upgraded since the airport was built in 1985, and it proved to be the more difficult construction project.

“We thought the kitchen would be the most challenging,” Pena said. “It turned out to be the federal inspection station.”

With the kitchen mostly ready, Pena said crews are now working day and night to finish the international terminal because a team of inspectors from U.S. Customs and Border Protection will be on site March 28-29 to look over the project.

“It’s all hands on deck,” Pena said.

A new passenger lounge also is in the works, but it’s being paid for by an outside firm and won’t be completed until this summer because it’s not as immediately necessary as the food preparation area and passenger check-in station, Campbell said.

It will be located on the second level overlooking the atrium.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new kitchen is tentatively set for April 1.

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