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It's a bird! No, it's more planes

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WEST CHICAGO -- DuPage Airport is one of the 100 busiest airports in the nation for the second straight year, rising to 81st in 2004, according to Federal Aviation Administration figures the airport released Monday.

In 2003, DuPage Airport was the 90th busiest airport nationwide, based on takeoffs and landings.

Meanwhile, the airport's competitors dropped in the rankings.

Of the other Chicago-area reliever airport - which, like DuPage, take general aviation traffic away from commercial air space at O'Hare and Midway international airports - Palwaukee ranked next (122nd), followed by Aurora (190th) and Waukegan (290th).

In 2003, Palwaukee ranked 100th while Aurora was 168th and Waukegan 289th.

"I don't believe we're just a bad-weather reliever," said DuPage Airport Authority Chairman Daniel Goodwin.

DuPage Airport's corporate traffic and jet fuel sales have risen since a lull after Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said Mark Doles, director of operations planning. Between 2003 and 2004, takeoffs and landings increased 8.7 percent to 197,868. Jet fuel sales rose 13.5 percent to 3.3 million gallons, while 100LL fuel sales dropped 5.6 percent to 351,704 gallons.

Airport officials credited an improving economy and their own management and staff for growing faster than the competition.

Executive Director David Bird said airport income is up 54 percent - from \$2.1 million to \$3.2 million - from this time last year, while staffing has remained about level. Goodwin praised employees for working harder.

However, the airport's 2005 budget was balanced partly with \$182,000 in cuts to employee benefits.

To handle the growth, DuPage Airport is continuing a number of projects.

Two new corporate-jet hangars are under construction along a newly widened driveway south of the flight center. And the airport just received a \$2.5 million federal grant to rehabilitate three taxiways, upgrade security measures and pay for a master development plan.

Just south of the airport, the airport-owned DuPage County Technology Park is making way for its first corporate structure.

Technology park plans call for developing in four wetland areas. On Monday, DuPage Technology Park board members chose to pay \$243,480 for wetland preservation along the Des Plaines River rather than replace the wetlands of park property.

Principal engineer Christopher B. Burke said the technology park could start construction sooner and possibly save money by purchasing the wetland credits.