

Source: South China Morning Post

Date: 7/12/2020

AVIATION

Airport tie-up with Zhuhai has benefits, experts say

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Hong Kong's planned tie-up with Zhuhai airport on the mainland is likely to strengthen the financial hub's global competitiveness in the cargo business, although the benefits for passengers are less clear, industry experts and an Airport Authority member say.

The plan is fraught with competitive and practical challenges for both airlines and passengers, according to experts and a *Post* review of aviation data.

"Airlines prefer connecting passengers at a single airport, ideally at a single terminal. That will save passengers time and save airlines costs," said Zheng Lei, founder and president of the Institute for Aviation Research, an independent think tank. But Frankie Yick Chi-ming, an Airport

Authority board member, described Hong Kong and Zhuhai as a "perfect match".

"I can see the synergies in cargo, but in the passenger market, I am struggling to see synergies," Zheng said of Yick's verdict.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor revealed new aviation initiatives in her annual policy address last month, outlining greater cooperation



Hong Kong aims woo mainland travellers. Photo: Handout

between the two airports via an equity injection.

The authority that runs Hong Kong International Airport last Thursday revealed talks would start soon to acquire a non-majority stake in the neighbouring airport to ensure input in its development.

The airport bosses aim to chart a new flight path for Zhuhai, melding its domestic routes with Hong Kong's array of long-haul flights in a bid to woo mainland passengers. Zhuhai would play a key role in the distribution of cargo to and from the world's busiest cargo hub.

The Airport Authority already owns a 55 per cent stake in the firm that has helped the municipal government manage the Zhuhai airport since 2006, but holds no ownership stake in the facility.

Situated in the west of the Greater Bay Area, Zhuhai is one of

the smaller airports in the region, focused on domestic air travel and handled 12.3 million passengers last year.

The authority now wants a direct stake in the airport itself to shape its future growth in line with Hong Kong's development by connecting to 160 mainland cities – some of which it already flies to – that have no international flights, as well as another 130 airports under construction.

An analysis of Zhuhai's 80 domestic routes show most destinations are in the mainland's third- or fourth-tier cities, which are not served by Hong Kong, but instead linked with Guangzhou and Shenzhen airports, according to Variflight.

"Compared with 2019, Zhuhai's domestic reach was enhanced in 2020 with a unique route expansion, which shows Zhuhai's civil aviation develop-

ment potential," a Variflight spokeswoman said. The mainland aviation data provider found Guangzhou had a near-dominant presence over domestic routes and performed the best on international connections.

Law Cheung-kwok, senior adviser at the aviation policy and research centre at Chinese University, said the capital injection would enable Hong Kong's airport to coordinate with Zhuhai Airport's domestic flights.

"There is no way we could do that with Guangzhou and Shenzhen," he said. "In that sense, Zhuhai Airport could attract or steal domestic passengers from Guangzhou and Shenzhen and feed into Hong Kong."

But aviation scholar Zheng said passengers would always look for a direct flight first, then a connecting flight with a competitive price and convenience.