

LEE COUNTY

Airport Expansion

The Lee County Port Authority has reported consistently increasing airport activity year-over-year. Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) ranks among the top 50 airports for passenger traffic in the United States and served nearly 6 million passengers in 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2019, the airport served over 10 million passengers and remains on target to recover back to pre-pandemic levels in 2021, only one year later. ([LINK](#)) Throughout 2020 and 2021, RSW remained the #1 airport in passenger recovery among the Top 50 U.S. airports (Figure 3) and ranked #31 Busiest U.S. airport based off TSA throughput passenger reports ([LINK](#)). RSW has also achieved record levels of total freight each year for the last 3 years, reaching over 37 million pounds of cargo moved in 2021 ([LINK](#)). This level of freight activity has not been reached since the period of growth seen before the economic downturn in 2007.

Increasing airport capacity allows businesses to reach new markets. RSW seeks to move forward on several large projects to accommodate the increased activity: finishing the new traffic control tower, progressing on the terminal expansion project, and building a second runway. As the new air traffic control tower finished construction, the terminal expansion project was next to begin in 2021; the \$250+ million project seeks to enhance the travel experience at RSW, especially during the busy winter season. These projects are expected to increase the demand for workers in Lee County, not including the countless number of jobs in related industries once the buildouts are complete. Air cargo and MRO (maintenance, repair, and overhaul) business investments are a top priority in Lee County for airport development because runway capacity studies, the primary driver for determining when the second runway project can begin, are based off take-offs and landings, not passenger activity.

Canada and Europe account for over 70% of RSW's international demand, with non-stops flights offered to both. ([LINK](#)) The Lee County Port Authority, who operates RSW, also operates Foreign-Trade Zone 213, which includes the RSW airport property and extends across 7 sites, 3,952 acres, and 3 counties ([LINK](#)). Expanding access to these sites in conjunction with the airport's future planned developments keeps Lee County the dominant anchor for domestic and international business growth in Southwest Florida. While the markets feeding this growth continue to be Midwest and Northeast cities, Southwest Florida is now seeing residential and business relocations from California, Texas and the Pacific Northwest. The accessibility to Southwest Florida via new non-stop routes from San Francisco, San Diego and Seattle to RSW is helping drive this surge. ([LINK](#)) As airport expansion continues, it is expected all the other parts that contribute to population growth will follow.

[Skyplex](#), a site located north of the runway at RSW, offers more than 1,100 acres for commercial development, including 75 acres of direct ramp access. Skyplex offers 843 acres of prime real estate that is being targeted for aviation and non-aviation development opportunities. Approximately 344 acres of this area are currently zoned for numerous uses, including corporate headquarters and regional offices, office complexes, medical, science and technology centers, warehouse and light industrial uses, retail centers and more. Additionally, 75 acres offer ramp accessibility that can accommodate up to Category IV aircraft. As a premier economic development sites, Skyplex offers the perfect fit for aviation-based businesses and operations including aircraft support services or maintenance, repair and overhaul facilities. Continued buildout of Skyplex, the surrounding area, and the airport expansion projects currently underway are expected to position Lee County as the premier location to connect SWFL to the rest of the nation and global market.

Seasonal Home Market

In Lee County, the accommodation and food services industries employ 1 out of every 10 people ([LINK](#)). Lee County receives approximately 5 million visitors a year that spend more than \$3 billion while in the area ([LINK](#)). Not only does the area benefit from the economic impact of the industry, but it also benefits from the quality of life to which it contributes. Every time a visitor pays for accommodations, funds are generated for our beaches, ballparks and attractions through a local tax option utilized by Lee County called the Tourist Development Tax (or Bed Tax) ([LINK](#)). The tourist development tax is used for: 53.6% - advertising and promotion for Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau operations and Lee County Sports Development operations; 26.4% - beach and shoreline improvements and maintenance; 20.0% - stadium debt service (includes debit payments for the Lee County Sports Complex and JetBlue Park, as well as major maintenance for both). In 2019, Lee County set a record bed tax of \$42,702,977; this record was exceeded by June of 2021, with a new year-end record now standing at \$53,332,883 collected ([LINK](#)). The County has roughly 13,000 hotel rooms and added 1,000 rooms during the pandemic. In addition, there are 3,500 in the pipeline including the expansive Margaritaville which broke ground in August. These rooms are approximately split between 5,000 coastal rooms and 8,000 in-land rooms, with most of the rooms in the pipeline located in-land.

Lee County relies heavily on the retirement and seasonal home markets for a major portion of the local economy. Upticks in number of travelers and seasonal residents occurs during the period of year called “snowbird season”; the time of year when Northern residents seek escape from cold and snowy winter weather in search of the plentiful sunshine. Lee County’s snowbird season typically begins around October/November and runs through to April/May. Lee County is the Number 1 “perch” in Florida, ahead of Palm Beach, Miami-Dade, Polk, Pinellas, and Sarasota counties. International travelers play a key role in our surge of seasonal residents. Foreign tourists made up 15-25% of Lee County visitors before the pandemic ([LINK](#)); overseas travelers often stay a minimum of 2 weeks while visiting Florida, with 55% staying at least 60 days and 33% staying at least 120 days ([LINK](#)). Although there are no formal data sources capable of providing complete coverage of temporary migration in the United States, it has been noted that snowbirds swell Florida’s population anywhere from 20 to 30 percent. During the busiest parts of the year, it is estimated that Lee County’s population reaches nearly 1 million residents, possibly surpassing the 1 million mark at any given moment when considering all travelers.

Increased interest in residing in Florida for seasonal or part-time use has led to Lee County to be a prime location when looking for a second home. Lee County has a total of 416,332 homes ([LINK](#)), with an estimated 23% of those homes ([LINK](#)) primarily used for occasional, recreational, or seasonal use. According to the National Association of Realtors, Lee County has the largest population of homes purchased for vacation or seasonal usage at 90,792 – the second closest was Cape Cod at 62,643 and Collier County at 58,406. ([LINK](#)) The connection between those who transition from seasonal residency to full-time residency in Lee County is apparent. Net migration has been the major contributor to Florida’s overall population growth for many years, with natural increase accounting for only a relatively small proportion. Over the past decade, almost 90% of total population growth came from net migration, with each individual year ranging from about 72% in 2010–2011 to over 97% by 2019–2020. ([Link](#))