Duluth's new airport terminal ready for takeoff

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By: Candace Renalls, Duluth News Tribune

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The Duluth International Airport’s new $78 million, state-of-the-art passenger terminal opening Monday has the wow factor.

It starts with the jaw-dropping check-in lobby with a glass-fronted wall rising 40 feet to the wave-shaped roof.

“There’s a lot of volume and it’s grand,” said the lead interior designer, Elizabeth Samsa of TKDA. “It’s a celebration of the region and where we’re going. It’s kind of a gateway to the Northland.”

Take the escalator or glass elevator to the mezzanine for a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. Go farther, past security, and the passenger concourse stretches the width of the building, accommodating more than three times the number of passengers as did the old terminal’s passenger waiting area.

“We’re really trying to give people a sense of who we are and what we’re about,” said Tom Werner, the Duluth Airport Authority’s executive director.

After four years of construction managed by Kraus-Anderson Construction Co., people can see for themselves. Preview looks will be given at an invitation-only VIP building dedication today at the terminal and a free public celebration from noon to 4 p.m. Saturday.

“The DAA and the board of directors were looking for a warmer airport that reflected the area, warmer than what you generally see,” Samsa said, noting that the old terminal built in 1973 lacks color.

So the roof and mezzanine have curved shapes to suggest the waves of Lake Superior, rippled decorative glass inside to represent water, and haphazard lines in the terrazzo floors inspired by cracked ice. A glass wall separating the secured and unsecured passenger areas is etched with a birch tree design. And outside, the rust-colored panels echo the color of the Great Lakes ore boats.
To balance the natural light that fills the interior, warm wood tones were used on wall panels and portions of the ceiling, Samsa said.

Crews this week were working on the finishing touches in preparation for the startup of operations, with the first flight departure at 6 a.m. Monday. The old terminal closes Sunday after its last scheduled flight at 10:37 p.m.

“We have crew everywhere, polishing and dusting the nooks and crannies and cleaning the remnants of construction,” Werner said Wednesday.

Systems were checked. Airlines moved in. Perishable food was delivered for concessions.

“Everything works,” Werner said as test announcements were made over the loudspeaker system and flight information showed on screens.

Saturday’s community celebration is especially important, he said.

“We want to open up the building with TSA (Transportation Security Administration) agents available to answer questions, so the public has more confidence when they travel,” he said.

Unlike the old terminal, the new terminal meets post-Sept. 11, 2001, federal safety and security requirements. Designed by Reynolds, Smith & Hill, the project is Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — LEED — Silver Certified because of its sustainable green energy features that include geothermal heating, natural lighting and a highly efficient water system.

Regionally made products and recycled materials also were used. And 75 percent of construction and demolition waste was diverted from the landfill.

Deficiencies of the old terminal were corrected in the new terminal’s design.

The front drop-off area of the old terminal would get congested, as would the passenger concourse beyond security, which had no restrooms or concessions.

In contrast, the new terminal has multiple pickup and drop-off lanes. The new concourse can accommodate 400 people waiting to board, compared to 120 people at the old terminal. The new concourse also has multiple restrooms, free Wi-Fi and floor plug-ins for laptops and cell phones. A cafe, bar and gift shop will be run by the same people who ran the old terminal’s Afterburner Lounge.

The parking apron outside the concourse will be able to handle more and larger jets.

The terminal’s design creates a better flow for foot traffic, with large, clear signs aided by the centrally located escalator, elevator and stairs.

“You know where you’re going, taking the stress out of travel,” Werner said.
In addition, the three airlines serving Duluth are now located next to each other in the check-in lobby.

“For years, Allegiant was on the west side of the terminal, tucked away,” Werner said.

Passenger screening has been consolidated to one location and open throughout the day. And U.S. Customs and international flight processing has one end of the building. Kiosks for self-serve check-ins will boost customer convenience and flow, Werner said.

“This is the nicest facility (in Minnesota), next to the Twin Cities,” Werner said.

And it’s all done in 110,000 square feet, the same as the old terminal.

“They got it right, they really did,” he said. “The design and efficiency of this building is amazing.”

Demolition of the old terminal, which is behind the new terminal, begins next month. That will make way for more aircraft parking near the new concourse. Construction of a parking ramp, which is part of the $78 million project cost, begins this spring with a targeted fall completion. The entire project has been paid for with federal grants and state bonding money.