

Delta's CEO has good taste

FASTEN SEATBELTS: It's good that Delta CEO Richard Anderson seems to like Memphis, but the next few years still won't be worry-free at the airport.

By Staff Reports, [The Commercial Appeal](#)

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If Richard Anderson ever leaves his job as CEO of Delta Air Lines, he would fit right in at the Memphis-Shelby County Airport Authority or the Memphis Regional Chamber.

During a stopover in Memphis this week, Anderson repeatedly sang the praises of Memphis in general and Memphis International Airport in particular.

Anderson told The Commercial Appeal's editorial board Wednesday that Memphis has been well-positioned as a "hub and spoke" distribution center, dating back to the days when goods were shipped by flatboats and wagons.

As for Memphis International, he proclaimed it "probably the best-run airport in the country."

In that meeting and in a speech on the University of Memphis campus the following day, Anderson repeatedly said that Memphis will remain a hub city if a planned merger between Delta and Northwest Airlines wins federal approval.

"This hub is an important and integral part of the merger," Anderson said. "I look forward to many more decades of success here in Memphis."

Those words should bring some measure of reassurance to those of us who have been worrying about what a Delta-Northwest merger might mean for Memphis.

In airline-speak, hubs are feeder cities where airlines offer greater numbers of flights to and from other locations.

At the time the merger was announced, many industry analysts were predicting that hub service would be discontinued at Memphis because it's the smallest city used for that purpose by either Northwest or Delta.

Arnold Perl, chairman of the local airport authority, said the analysts underestimated some of the advantages Memphis has. For example, Perl said, Memphis International stacks up well against its competitors in terms of in-air or on-tarmac flight delays, an increasingly important factor as fuel costs continue to rise.

"What they (pundits) don't realize is that sometimes smaller is stronger," he said.

Officials at the chamber, airport authority and elsewhere in the community deserve credit for highlighting Memphis International's strengths.

Even so, it seems unrealistic to expect an unrestrained boom of prosperity at the airport, at least in the short-term.

This week's announcement that Delta plans to stop using Pinnacle Airlines as one of its regional providers doesn't bode well for one of this community's larger businesses.

Memphis-based Pinnacle's largest customer is Northwest. Anderson wouldn't speculate about the fate of Pinnacle's contract with Northwest if the merger is approved.

However, if Delta doesn't like Pinnacle, and Delta absorbs Northwest, it's not illogical to conclude Pinnacle and its 2,000 or so Memphis area employees might face some serious problems.

It would be wise for the chamber or another economic development agency to develop job retraining and job placement plans for Pinnacle employees, just in case.

Fuel costs are also going to be a problem for all of the airlines, a merged Delta-Northwest not excluded.

Even as a hub city, Memphis may stand to lose some of its flights over the next few years.

In short, there is some reason for optimism about the airport's future, so long as it's tempered with a healthy dose of realism.