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## **Construction Delays, Cost Overruns Could Postpone Opening of New Airport in Mexico City**

by Carlos Navarro

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The Mexican Congress is deeply concerned about major delays and cost overruns in the construction of a new airport in Mexico City. The facility, which is targeted for completion in 2020, would handle about 120 million passengers per year, almost three times the rate of the Benito Juárez International Airport, which is also known as the Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de México (AICM).

President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration had originally planned to expand the existing facility in an easterly direction ([SourceMex Jan. 15, 2014](#)). However, subsequent studies showed that this plan would be insufficient to meet the rapidly growing passenger traffic projected for the Mexican capital in coming years. In addition to overcrowding, the current facility has limited capacity to handle flights because it only has four runways, two for landings and two for departures.

The administration announced the change of plans in mid-2014, but did not release a full plan until September 2016, during Peña Nieto's state-of-the-nation address.

"The current facility does not allow simultaneous departures and landings, which is unacceptable," the president said then.

### *New airport would rank second globally*

The Nuevo Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de México (NAICM), which is the name given to the planned facility, would be the second largest air terminal in the world, surpassed only by the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. At present, Beijing's Capital International Airport is the world's second largest facility.

"This is the biggest project in Mexico in 50 years," said the daily newspaper *Excélsior*. "[The airport] will have six runways, three of which could be operated simultaneously."

Elected officials and business leaders touted the economic benefits of the project, including the creation of jobs during construction and once the facility is fully in service. According to officials, the airport could create as many as 600,000 direct and indirect jobs in the Mexico City area, including the communities of Texcoco, Atenco, and Ecatepec in México state.

Jesús Padilla Zenteno, president of the business organization *Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana* (COPARMEX), said the new terminal was needed because passenger and cargo traffic at the AICM has increased by 5.7% annually during the past five years. The AICM serves 42 million passengers per year. The NAICM is expected to support 120 million passengers annually.

Construction costs of the new facility, which was designed in association with award-winning British architect Norman Foster, were originally estimated at 169 billion pesos, or about US\$9.5 billion at the current exchange rate.

The Grupo Aeroportuario de la Ciudad de México (GACM) assigned the contract to build the airport to a consortium led by Operadora Cicsa, a company owned by Mexico's entrepreneur Carlos Slim. The consortium also includes the Spanish company Acciona.

Under the construction plan, the contractor was scheduled to complete the external structure of the terminal, a new control tower, and two runways by the end of 2018. The goal is to complete the work by 2020, when the NAICM would begin operations.

### *Congress looking into reported delays*

However, recent construction delays and cost overruns could delay the opening of the airport, possibly as long as three years, warned Deputy Rafael Hernández Soriano, who chairs the committee with oversight over the project.

A timetable developed by the GACM indicated that the outfitting of the construction site would be concluded in the three first months of this year, but some media reports indicate that the work has not been completed.

Hernández also noted that the cost of the project has increased from the original price tag of 169 billion pesos (US\$9.5 billion) to 186 billion (US\$10.5 billion).

"Costs are increasing not only due to [a rise in the price of] supplies," he said, "but also due to the peso-US dollar exchange rate and the credits acquired by the GACM."

The delays have prompted the bicameral multi-party commission in Congress, the Comisión Permanente, to request an updated report from the communications and transportation ministry (Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes, SCT). The senators and deputies who form the commission also requested a report from the GACM with details on all contracts and agreements related to the project, particularly all relevant financial information.

### *Environmental impact*

There is also mixed news on the environmental front. The facility is touted as the first terminal outside of Europe with a neutral environmental footprint.

"NAICM was conceived as a sustainable infrastructure project from its inception and seeks to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and pollution through certified green buildings, renewable energy (mainly photovoltaic solar), and water treatment," the rating agency S&P said in an assessment of the facility.

Officials are also considering plans to deal with the transportation system to support the airport, including highways and commuter options. According to a study conducted by the GACM, the new terminal will increase the number of commutes to the airport from the 322,000 estimated in 2014 to about 593,000 in 2020. The concern is that the high volume of trips by motor vehicle will add to pollution problems in the area.

Authorities are considering construction of a suburban commuter railway as an option to deal with this potential problem. The train would connect with the nearby Buenavista subway station.

Another environmental concern is the nature of some of the materials used to develop the foundation of the airport. Because the terminal is under construction on Mexico City's dry lake bed

(Lago de Texcoco), contractors are making use of tezontle, a volcanic material that absorbs water from the subsoil. A number of deposits of the material have been discovered in the mountains of México state. "The problem is that these deposits are located in forests, and trees are being cut down to gain access to the material," biologist María de los Ángeles Valdés Ramírez of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) wrote in the online news site Cronica.com.

The deposits of tezontle are located in an area known as the Barrera Forestal de Oriente (eastern forest barrier), where trees were planted to prevent sandstorms from hammering the area of Mexico City where the current and future airports are located. "This barrier is now in danger, as these reforested hills contain large deposits of tezontle," Valdés Ramírez said. "This area is being deforested so that tezontle can be brought to [stabilize] the land at the new airport."

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