

NYAMA Member Profile
Lee Weitz, Deputy Director
Buffalo Niagara International and Niagara Falls International Airports

Buffalo Niagara International Airport (BUF) Deputy Director Lee Weitz has a simple mandate: Provide safe, secure, clean, reliable and efficient facilities for the five million annual air travelers who use BUF.

The customers who have made Buffalo Niagara International the state's third-busiest airport always take priority, Weitz points out, because they're not just passengers who need and expect great service – they're also part of the local community.

The community that Weitz takes such great care to serve gives back to its airport in some very special ways, he says.

Buffalo's Ambassadors Program, which provides free assistance and information to passengers, is staffed by more than 50 volunteers from the region who combine to donate more than 7,000 hours annually. Then there's the Paws for Love Program, which features more than 75 volunteers donating nearly 2,000 hours annually with service pets at the airport, interacting with and comforting passengers.

"We are so fortunate to have so many great volunteers in these programs, and it helps keep us customer-centric," says Weitz, the current NYAMA vice president who became deputy director for the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority's (NFTA) Aviation group in 2005 after more than 25 years in the airline industry. Weitz also serves as deputy director for Niagara Falls International Airport, which the authority also operates.

"We have to make sure we focus on the cleanliness of our facilities, ensure security checkpoints operate efficiently, and keep wait times to a minimum," Weitz says. "We also work closely with airlines to ensure the delivery of baggage is efficient, and we're working to enhance that as well."

Weitz is talking about a multimillion capital project that will expand BUF's baggage claim area, increase the number of carousels, and upgrade to modern equipment. The project also includes related amenities and enhancements, including improvements to curbside pickup, and new automated exit lanes that will eliminate cross-traffic between inbound and outbound passengers. The project –

necessitated by strong passenger growth that outpaced projections – is currently in design. Work is expected to begin next year and be completed in 2018.

It's one of several exciting developments for BUF, which will be the host airport for NYAMA's Annual Fall Conference in September 2017. Weitz says he and NFTA Aviation Director Bill Vanecek, a NYAMA past president, are excited to show off "the rebirth of the Buffalo waterfront."

"We anticipate having a great event in 2017," says Weitz, chairman of the NYAMA's Fall Conference committee for the second time. (He also was a committee member when BUF hosted in 2012.) "Attendees will be able to see all the improvements that have taken place at Canalside, HARBORCENTER, and the entire downtown area. We're going to love showing off the city."

The city's renaissance, Weitz adds, "makes it more important than ever that our airports continue to thrive and improve, so that we can support all the economic development in Western New York."

Weitz says he's encouraged by recent action taken by lawmakers and Governor Cuomo to help fund important aviation projects in the state. And Weitz believes NYAMA's advocacy has played a significant role in the renewed focus on our industry.

"NYAMA offers terrific value for its members," he says. "I don't think enough airports take advantage of the good work NYAMA does. Even if it's something as simple as developing key relationships within the industry here in New York, I would encourage others to do it, and urge those who aren't members to join us, so that we can speak with an even stronger and more unified voice."