



WORCESTER REGIONAL AIRPORT (ORH)

SCALE, SERVICE, AND THE TEST AHEAD

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, after recommending the sale or lease of ORH to Massport, The Research Bureau endorsed the Memorandum of Understanding between Worcester and Massport for the transfer of the airport in [Worcester Regional Airport Positioned For Take-Off](#). Six years later, The Research Bureau then published [Bureau Brief—Worcester Regional Airport \(ORH\)](#) which examined the airport as an underutilized but valuable public infrastructure asset. That Bureau Brief reviewed Massport's ownership history, reliability, safety investments, and JetBlue's arrival as possible signs of a commercial passenger rebound. This updated brief revisits those issues a decade later. It examines ORH's history, recent passenger activity, regional competition, ORH's economic impact on the region, and Massport's current strategy for expanding service.

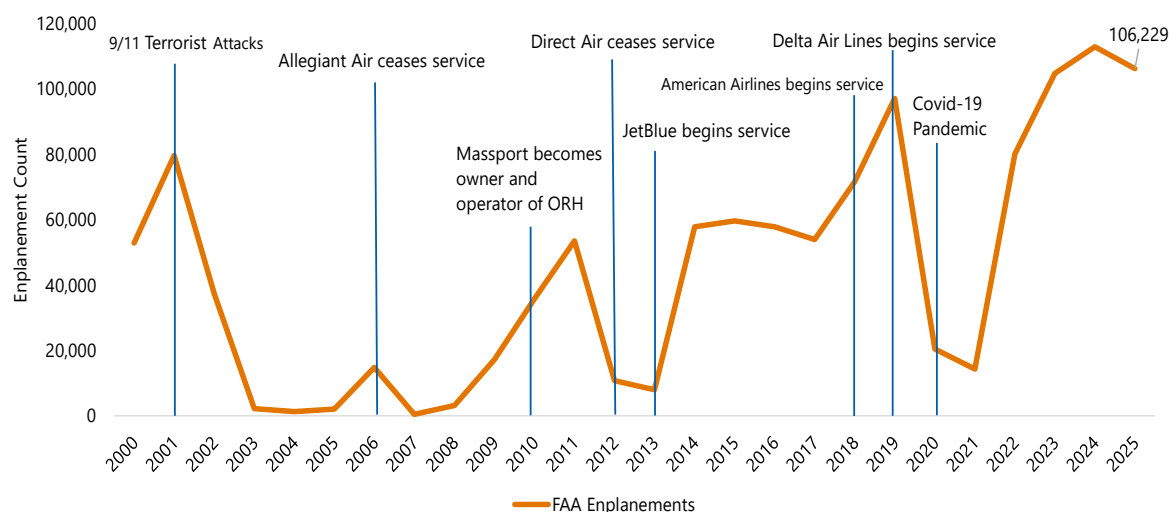
THE HISTORY OF ORH

The Worcester Regional Airport began commercial passenger service in 1946. Its strongest period of service came in 1989 when annual enplanements reached a historic high of 177,861. An enplanement is one passenger boarding an airplane. By contrast, passenger-volume figures used later in this brief count both arriving and departing passengers. However, by the late 1990s, annual enplanements had fallen to below 10,000 due to the departure of major national airlines. Demand for air travel had already begun weakening nationally by early 2001 as the U.S. economy slowed. The September 11 terrorist attacks deepened that industrywide decline, worsening airline losses and prompting carriers to reduce service across their networks, particularly in smaller markets. ORH was affected by those reductions and its passenger activity subsequently returned to low levels. Passenger activity

grew slowly and unevenly during the 2010s as multiple airlines like Direct Air and Allegiant Air began and ended service abruptly. Enplanements then reached nearly 100,000 in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted air travel worldwide for nearly a year. Since the end of the pandemic, ORH has notably recovered and resumed a period of strong passenger growth.

Established in 1946 as a municipal department, ORH remained under City ownership until 2010. During that period, Worcester supported the airport via municipal funding, staffing, and borrowing for capital improvements. Between FY1987 and FY1992, the City transferred approximately \$1.8 million from its General Fund to subsidize the airport. In 1993, the ORH had 20 city employees responsible for airport operations and facilities. The City's enduring financial commitment continued after Massport began managing the airport in 2000. Between FY2004 and FY2010, Worcester paid \$7.4 million toward

Figure 1: Worcester Regional Airport Annual Enplanements



Source: Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Passenger Boarding Enplanement Data

Note: 2025 enplanement data is preliminary.

**Table 1: Worcester Regional Airport: Trends and Commercial Service History**

Period	History
1989	ORH annual enplanements peak at approximately 354,000
1992	A new 59,000-square-foot passenger terminal with four gates opens
Late 1990s	Annual enplanements fall below 10,000
2000	Massport begins managing ORH under a management agreement with the City of Worcester
Early 2000s	Post-9/11 travel declines, airline financial pressures contribute to historically low enplanement levels
2010	Massport assumes full ownership and control of Worcester Regional Airport
2013	JetBlue begins commercial service to Orlando and Fort Lauderdale
2018	American Airlines begins Philadelphia service
2019	Delta Air Lines begins Detroit service, later replaced with New York-LaGuardia connection
2020	Scheduled commercial service is disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic; airline service later resumes

airport operating deficits and debt associated with previous capital improvements.

As of late 2026, ORH is served by American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and JetBlue with nonstop flights to Philadelphia, New York-LaGuardia, Orlando, and Fort Lauderdale, as well as seasonal service to Fort Myers. American Airlines provided one scheduled daily round trip between Worcester and Philadelphia, Delta Air Lines provided the round trip between Worcester and New York-LaGuardia and JetBlue provided the Orlando and Fort Lauderdale round trips with the Fort Myers flights occurring only during the winter-spring season. Massport reports that ORH served nearly 230,000 passengers in 2024 which was its highest total in 34 years. **Massport has invested more than \$150 million in airport improvements since assuming full ownership.** From FY2010 through FY2025, Massport also spent \$139 million covering ORH's operating deficits, an average of more than \$8 million annually.

MARKET POTENTIAL AND AIRPORT COMPETITION

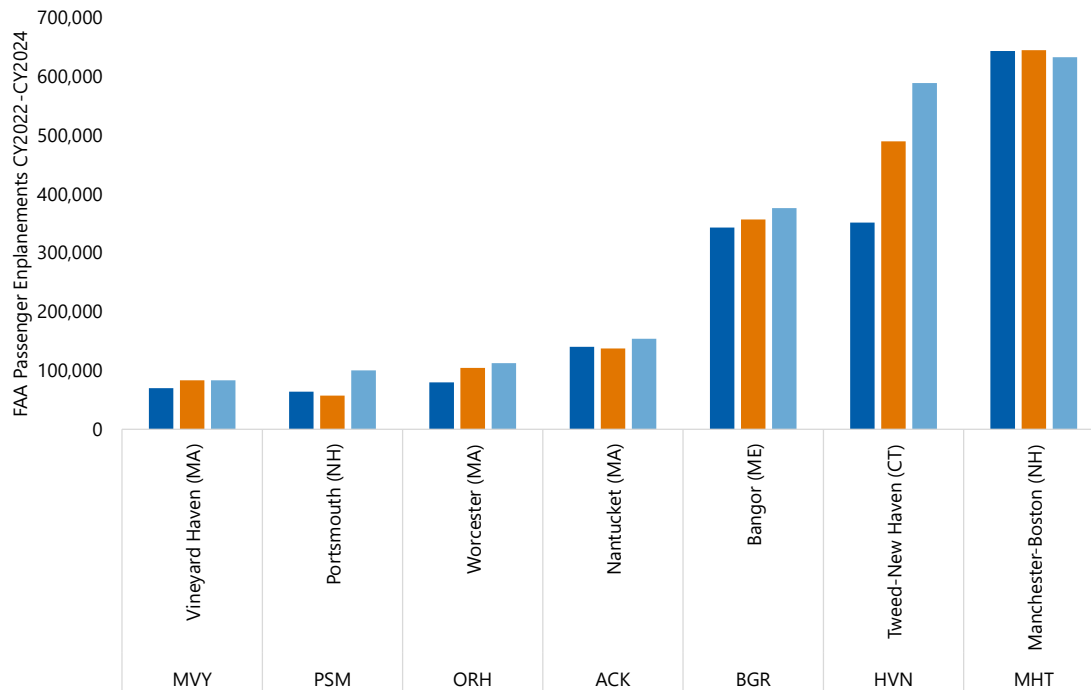
Worcester Regional Airport handles a relatively small commercial passenger volume compared with selected New England airports. The most recent published catchment estimate placed ORH's catchment at about 2.2 million people across portions of Massachusetts, New

Hampshire, Vermont, and Connecticut. A catchment area describes the geographic market from which an airport can draw passengers. Its population is not equivalent to annual passenger demand. Assessing ORH's potential market requires considering household income, travel frequency, business travel needs, ground access, and the destinations, fares, and schedules available at competing airports.

Operating in a geographically compact and highly competitive New England airport market could explain why ORH is being so underused. Worcester is one of nine commercial airports in Massachusetts and one of 22 commercial airports across New England. In CY2024, ORH recorded 112,872 enplanements compared with 376,456 at Bangor, ME, 589,409 at Tweed-New Haven, CT, 633,257 at Manchester-Boston, NH, approximately 1.9 million at T.F. Green in Rhode Island, approximately 3.2 million at Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks, CT, and about 21 million at Boston Logan. These comparisons illustrate the regional aviation market. The airports differ in scale, geography, airline service, and access to competing airports. In CY2024, ORH was most comparable in passenger enplanements to Portsmouth International Airport at Pease in New Hampshire, which recorded 100,298 enplanements (see Figure 2). Both airports handled substantially fewer enplanements than the higher-volume regional airports shown in Figure 3. Pease also had a limited commercial service profile. During 2024, its Allegiant Air and Breeze Airways routes served Florida destinations.

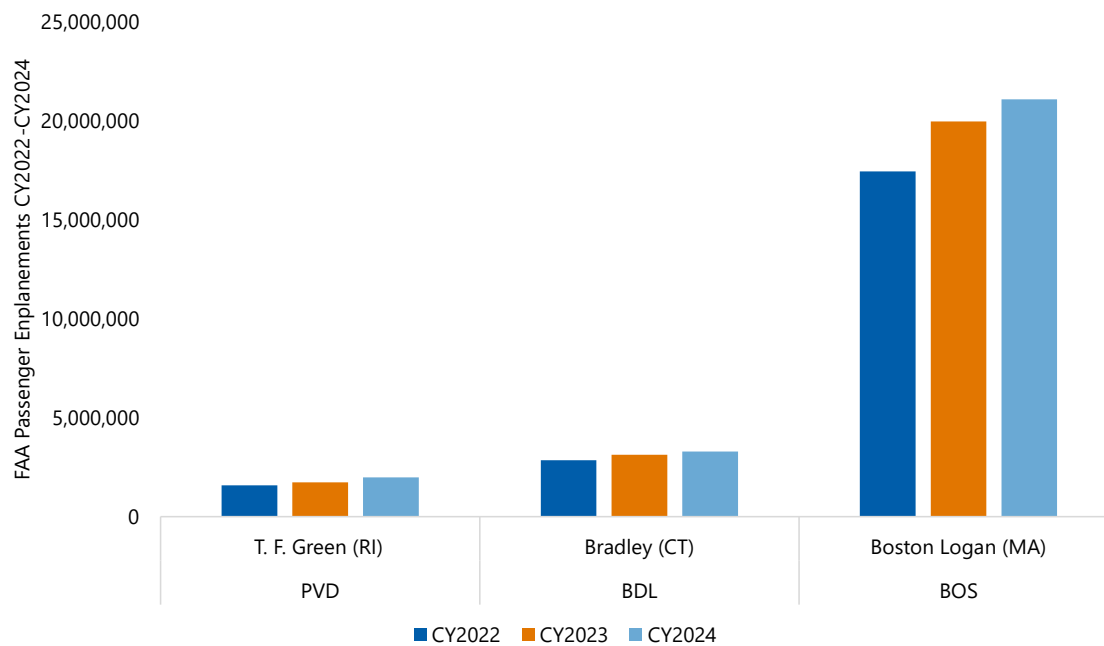


Figure 2: Selected New England Regional Airports



Source: FAA Passenger Boarding Enplanement Data

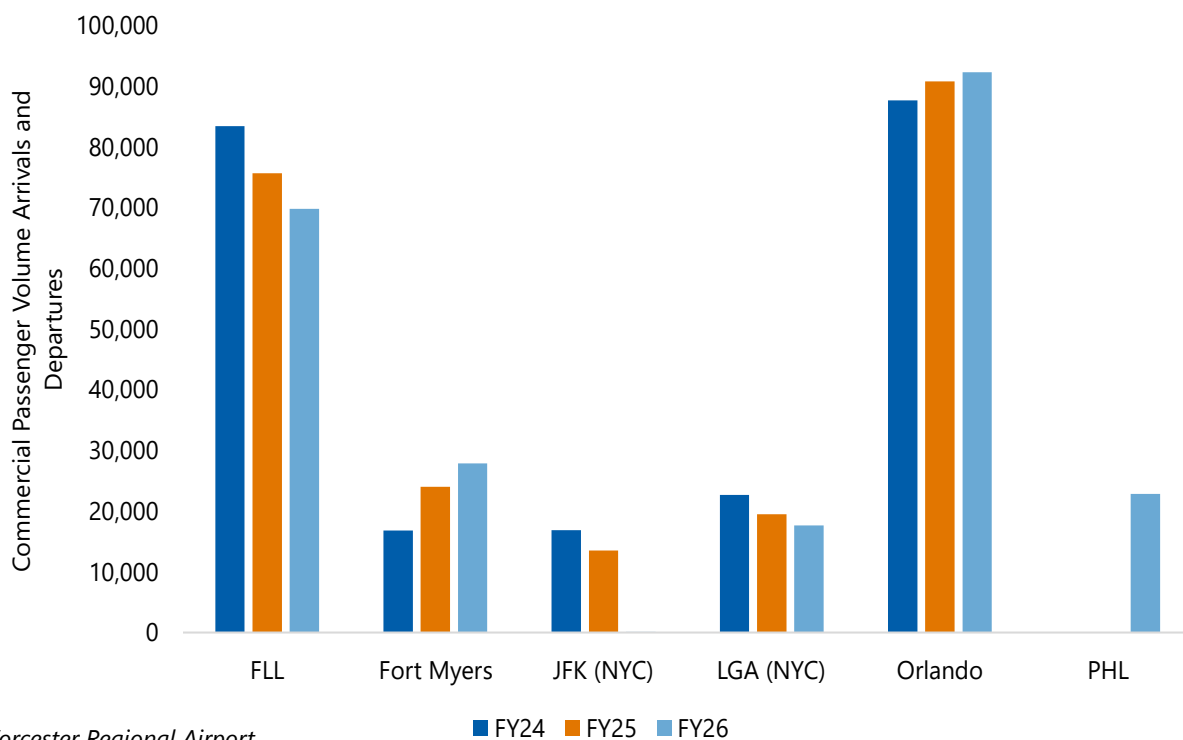
Figure 3: Selected Higher-Volume New England Airports



Source: FAA Passenger Boarding Enplanement Data

Airport provided data also shows a limited set of destinations, mostly concentrated in Florida with additional service to New York and Philadelphia. This destination constraint gives travelers who live within ORH's catchment an incentive to consider nearby airports with substantially more domestic and international options. While the figures do not illustrate why an individual traveler chooses one airport over another, they do help explain the competitive pressure ORH currently faces.

Even within this competitive environment, a 2020 survey by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and Massport found substantial interest in additional ORH service. Among 1,286 respondents, 93% said they would be likely or very likely to use ORH if more direct service was available and 51% of respondents cited the airport's limited destinations, lack of direct flights, and high prices as reasons why they did not use it. **Adding additional destinations could encourage greater use of the airport.**

**Figure 4: Worcester Regional Airport: Commercial Passenger Volume by Route and Fiscal Year**

Source: Worcester Regional Airport

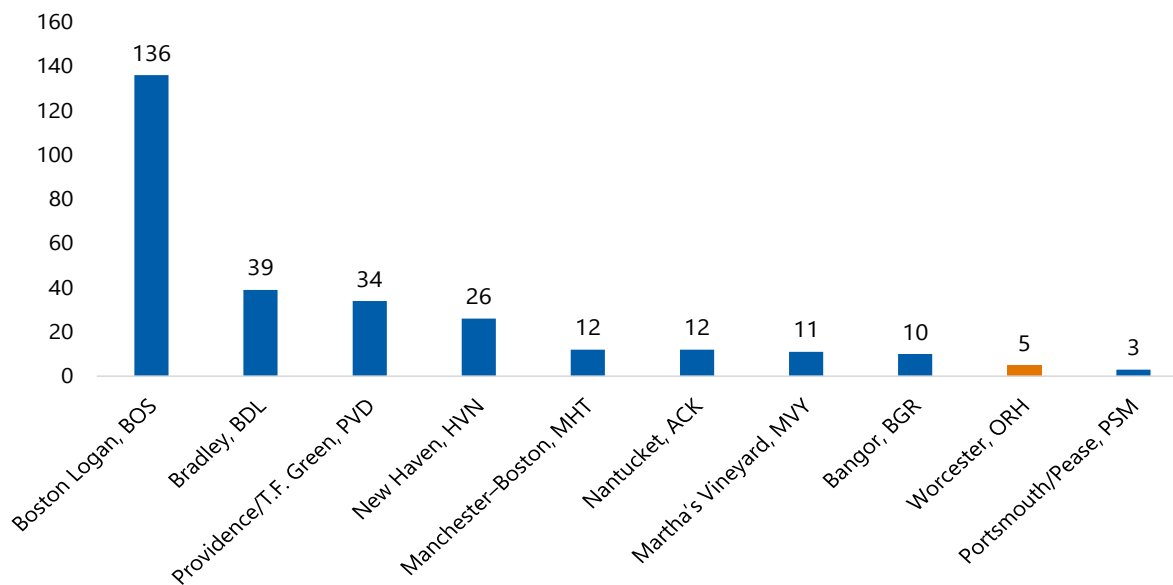
*FLL is Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Service Change: American Airlines resumed daily flights to Philadelphia in July 2025. Note: Passenger volume and FAA enplanements are not interchangeable. Enplanements count passenger boardings; the airport's passenger volume figures include both arriving and departing passengers.

The survey also indicates stated interest among respondents rather than a forecast of passenger demand. Existing route volumes provide evidence of actual airport use, but evaluating a route's commercial potential also requires information on available seats, schedules, fares, and revenue.

Actual passenger activity currently illustrates the tangible demand for the routes ORH currently offers. Airport data in Figure 4 shows that the Florida destinations, including Orlando, Fort Lauderdale and Fort Myers, generated the highest passenger volumes between FY2024 and FY2026. Orlando and Fort Myers also demonstrated the most growth across the period. By comparison, the New York and Philadelphia routes recorded substantially lower passenger volumes in the years shown. It is too early though to determine Philadelphia's long-term potential but it is showing promise as it is a hub for American Airlines. In its first year, Philadelphia's passenger volume exceeded the highest annual totals recorded for the JFK and LaGuardia routes. Overall, the data shows that the **Florida routes recorded the highest passenger volume, while Philadelphia's first-year total indicates comparatively strong early use.**

ORH'S REGIONAL ECONOMIC IMPACT

Passenger traffic is only one way to evaluate the importance of an airport to a city and region. MassDOT's economic impact studies examine how aviation activity contributed to the surrounding economy via employment, payroll, economic output, and related financial activity. Since assuming ownership of ORH in 2010, Massport has invested more than \$150 million in airport improvements, including two additional jet bridges, a Category III instrument landing system, and runway resurfacing. MassDOT's 2019 study estimated that ORH supported 587 jobs and generated \$97 million in annual economic output. [Massport's Economic Impact Report 2025](#) estimated that **ORH's economic footprint had increased to nearly 800 jobs and \$182 million in annual economic output.** The 2025 total includes \$89 million associated with airport-based businesses, \$61 million associated with Massport's operating and capital expenditures, and \$32 million associated with commercial visitor spending. Together, these findings illustrate that **ORH's regional economic significance extends well beyond its passenger count.**

**Figure 5: Scheduled Passenger Nonstop Destinations at Selected New England Airports, July 2024**

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics

Note: Counts represent unique nonstop destinations with sustained scheduled passenger service in July 2024.

Routes and service frequencies vary seasonally.

EXPANDING COMMERCIAL SERVICE

[Massport's 2025 Strategic Plan](#) provides a framework for managing growth across its aviation, maritime and real estate assets. For Worcester, the plan presents a mixed picture. The Strategic Plan credits Massport's investments since 2010 with significant growth in operations and passenger volumes. But it has also identified structural and demand limitations that make additional growth difficult. One limitation is competition from nearby airports, including Boston Logan, T. F. Green, Bradley International, Manchester-Boston, and Tweed-New Haven. These airports offer substantially more destinations and generally more frequent service, giving travelers an incentive to use them over ORH. Currently, ORH's commercial service is concentrated in the afternoon and early evening, while nearby airports offer a broader range of departure times, including morning flights. This wider coverage gives travelers greater flexibility when planning their trips which may make these nearby airports more convenient to use over Worcester. Airlines solely determine destinations, flight frequencies, and schedules through their network planning decisions. According to Massport, airlines prioritize higher revenue business routes at larger airports early in the day with smaller airports like ORH served later in the day as capacity in their networks become available. **Massport can support service development, but additional flights require an airline to identify a commercially viable opportunity.** Community partners can contribute by documenting travel needs and helping promote existing service.

At the same time, Massport describes ORH as an important component of the state's airport system. The Strategic Plan identifies ORH's available airfield capacity, potential cargo operations, and opportunities to develop non-aeronautical parcels as assets that could support future growth.

Additionally, the **Strategic Plan's 2035 aspiration is for the Worcester Regional Airport to serve 500,000+ passengers annually** and to provide more convenient commercial access for Central Massachusetts residents. Thus, the Plan describes several possible options to achieve this goal, such as maintaining and growing commercial service through partnerships, assessing cargo and logistics opportunities, and utilizing and hosting future aviation technologies such as electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft.

Massport already supports new service through airport-fee credits and cooperative marketing under its Worcester Air Service Incentive Program. A minimum revenue guarantee (MRG) would provide a different form of support by covering an agreed revenue shortfall. FAA policy prohibits using airport funds for MRGs, while allowing qualifying incentives funded separately through non-airport sources.

Massport also states that it will work with elected officials, business leaders, and economic development partners to explore whether state supported incentives like MRGs are appropriate for ORH to attract more passenger service. The plan identifies this as an option for further evaluation.

A minimum revenue guarantee is a route specific financial agreement under which a state government guarantees an



airline a specified minimum level of ticket revenue for a defined period. If ticket revenue falls below the agreed minimum, the local government sponsor pays the shortfall. The purpose of an MRG is to reduce an airline's financial risk when starting or expanding service, but an MRG cannot create passenger demand or guarantee that a route will remain profitable after support ends.

A 2008 review by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of Inspector General identified 18 MRG projects across the U.S. and found that eight or 44% of them met the study's definition of success. Based on the sources reviewed for this Research Brief, this remains the most recent study that provided a specific success rate for MRG supported projects. The report classified a project as successful when the state's stated objectives were achieved, for example, when the resulting route service continued for at least 12 months after the MRG ended. The 44% figure is a useful historical benchmark, but not a national success rate. The study also did not establish whether MRGs solely caused a route to become profitable or remain permanently in service.

Among the successful cases examined in the report, the most notable pattern was not geographic. Rather, successful MRG-supported routes linked smaller regional airports to major hub cities like service from Bangor, Maine to Chicago, Illinois or from Charleston, West Virginia to Houston, Texas. Hub connectivity can play an important role in spurring the creation of a durable new route. But they do not prove that a new route to a major hub will succeed because it simply offers a major hub connection. ORH already serves major connecting hubs, but its Florida routes carry substantially more passengers than its hub routes. Philadelphia is a notable exception. In its first year, it carried more passengers than either the JFK or LaGuardia routes did in FY2024 or FY2025, though its volume remained below the Florida routes. This suggests that hub access alone does not predict passenger volume at ORH. Current passenger totals alone cannot establish which future hub routes would be viable at ORH. Any proposal should be evaluated on its connections, schedule, capacity, fares, and expected revenue.

Furthermore, neighboring states like Rhode Island and Connecticut have also used MRG like public incentives to attract and maintain passenger service. Connecticut supported Aer Lingus's Bradley to Dublin route through a MRG. A revised agreement in 2018 allowed up to \$13.3 million in support across the first four years of service. In April 2025, Connecticut approved the use of approximately \$1.37 million in previously allocated funds to provide

additional support if the airline did not meet its revenue targets. In return, Aer Lingus committed to maintaining regular service through October 2026.

Rhode Island has also given state aid to airlines to reimburse airline marketing expenses for new routes and to develop direct routes to and from T. F. Green Airport. Breeze Airways was one airline that received \$8 million from Rhode Island to help with marketing campaigns, ground handling costs, and new route development. The airline's passenger volume at T. F. Green grew by 21.6% between 2024 and 2025. Yet, there is a mixed record of success with this type of state assistance. In March 2024, the Rhode Island House fiscal staff reported that only two of 16 routes associated with the state incentive effort remained active. Ultimately, this growth does not prove whether state incentives can help increase passenger volume or whether new routes will endure after public aid ends. For ORH, the Rhode Island and Connecticut examples suggest that any proposed incentive ought to be evaluated based on the type of service it provides and if that service can continue once public support ends.

CONCLUSION

ORH's recent history presents a complicated but promising picture. The airport remains underused relative to its potential market and nearby peers, but its recent passenger data shows that certain routes are attracting substantial local and regional interest. The Florida routes demonstrate that **Worcester can support popular nonstop service even in a competitive region**. The economic impact studies also show that the airport's significance to the Worcester region goes beyond its enplanement totals.

Looking ahead, the 2025 Strategic Plan sets an ambitious goal of more than doubling ORH's current passenger volume by 2035 and identifies several methods to pursue this. Expanding commercial service will require **cooperation among Massport, airlines, and Worcester's business and community partners**. Any MRG pilot should establish **a public commitment, a fixed end date, regular reporting, and measures of performance during and after support**. Experience elsewhere offers lessons for program design, but does not determine the outcome at ORH. ORH's recent passenger data show obvious signs of strong growth. Worcester has a strong community of universities, life science sectors, and health care institutions that are crucial for any future growth of the airport.



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