

[East Valley Tribune](#)

Harry E. Mitchell

Between now and New Year's Day, millions of Americans will take to the skies to reunite with family and friends for the holidays. After a summer of record flight delays, however, many are wondering what they'll find when they get to the airport.

Unfortunately, what they'll find is an air travel system that is stretched so thin and so short on capacity that it is only one ill-timed storm away from causing major delays across the national grid. We all remember when last year's blizzard closed Denver's airport and it took the system days to absorb the ripple effect. We need to do better.

The issue is especially acute at some of our nation's largest metropolitan areas and busiest hubs. Today, just seven airports account for 72 percent of total delays: three in the New York City metro area as well as hubs in Atlanta, Chicago, Houston and Philadelphia.

Phoenix runs the serious risk of joining the list. Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport is already the nation's eighth busiest airport. Combine that with the projections that Arizona's population will double by 2030 and we have a recipe for gridlock.

If we don't want the Valley to suffer the same fate as other large and busy metropolitan areas, we need to prepare now for our future aviation needs.

Many improvements - such as the new light rail system, which will offer more efficient access to Sky Harbor and ease traffic congestion around the terminals - are already in the works.

And while these are important steps forward, the Federal Aviation Administration has warned that, even with the many improvements we have planned, we will still need additional capacity. The best long-term solution is to make development of Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport a top regional priority.

Gateway already has key supporters. The mayors of Mesa, Phoenix, Gilbert and Queen Creek, as well as the governor of the Gila River Indian Community, are all part of the airport authority.

That's exactly the kind of regional cooperation we're going to need.

Efforts to develop the airport are already paying off. In October, Allegiant Airways began service to 13 cities from Gateway. Within a week, passenger loads were 25 percent higher than expected. That's promising news.

In addition to improving our airport capacity, Gateway has the potential to become a powerful economic engine for the East Valley.

We all know that business travel and tourism generate billions of dollars in economic activity, especially here in Arizona. Sky Harbor serves more than 40 million passengers each year, and those passengers generated an estimated \$20 billion annual impact on our state's economy.

Gateway's impact is smaller, but it is still very significant. For example, in 2002, when the airport saw less than 1,000 passenger departures, it generated an estimated \$251.4 million in local impact. To put that number in perspective, next year's Super Bowl is expected to generate about \$300 million.

In addition to relieving congestion and preventing crippling delays at our busy international airport in Phoenix, an active Gateway airport would create thousands of jobs in the East Valley.

To be successful, though, we will have to ensure that Gateway remains a viable option for airlines. That will require investment, and that's why, in Congress, I am working to secure much-needed taxiway improvements at the airport.

Developing Gateway into a job creating and delay-alleviating force won't happen overnight. But with a long-term commitment from all of us, it will happen.

With wise investment we can ensure that we have many happy holidays ahead.

Rep. Harry Mitchell is a Democrat who represents Congressional District 5, which includes Scottsdale, Tempe, west Mesa and Ahwatukee Foothills.