

A runway reborn



Workers smooth a recently poured 18-inch deep section of runway Tuesday at Sea-Tac Airport. The longest runway is being torn up and simultaneously replaced.



Photos by JANET CHYDEN/The News Tribune

Sea-Tac's oldest and longest runway is being torn up and completely replaced for the first time since the airport opened in the mid-1940's.

SEA-TAC: Crews take airport's first runway down to the original dirt and start rebuilding

BY JOHN GILLIE
The News Tribune

When the concrete surface of Sea-Tac Airport's oldest runway first felt an airliner's wheels at touchdown, those wheels belonged to a twin-engine, propeller-driven United Airlines DC-3.

That first ceremonial landing at Sea-Tac came nearly 65 years ago in the midst of World War II. That DC-3 is long retired, but the original runway soldiered on, supporting the weight of airliners until late this spring.

Now the original concrete, buried under more than two feet of successive asphalt overlays added over the years, is being unearthed again. Ground into gravel-sized pieces, that concrete will once again serve as a foundation for Sea-Tac's rebuilt main runway.

The nearly 12,000-foot-long runway, the airport's mainstay for decades, is being replaced for the first time in its history. The \$80-million-plus job was long overdue. The Federal Aviation Administration rated its surface as poor. But the lack of sufficient alternate runways to handle the airport's 1,000 daily landings and takeoffs, meant that the airport's owner, the Port of Seattle, had to put off its reconstruction, said airport spokesman Perry Copper.

That situation changed last fall. That's when the airport opened its 8,500-foot, \$1.1 billion-third runway, fourteen years in the making. That allowed the airport

significant events in the airport's history: its original construction on the site of Bow Lake, its lengthening and reinforcement as airliners grew larger and jets replaced propliners as the main airport users.

The original runway, the north-south component of a T-shaped runway configuration of runways at the 1944-vintage airport, was built of concrete six to eight inches thick concrete, said Scott Kyles, the port's runway reconstruction project manager. That concrete was laid without a rock base, but straight onto earth that had been compacted. The original section was some 4,000-feet long.

As the concrete wore and as planes became larger, the runway was lengthened several times reaching its final 11,901 feet in the early '70s after it was extended southward over South 188th Street on an overpass.

As asphalt overlays on the original concrete began deteriorating, the port applied additional layers of asphalt to smooth the surface.

Without the third runway, the overlays were done in small sections, between midnight and dawn when air traffic was light. The one runway remaining was sufficient to handle that traffic overnight, said Cooper.

Though the runway itself is now closed, the job must still accommodate itself to airport traffic. That means rebuilding the runway in sections, keeping open some taxiways where airliners cross the runway to access the terminal while closing others for rebuilding.

At each of those taxiways, access control personnel, who communicate with ground control and the control tower by radio, allow construction machinery and dump trucks to cross the taxiways when aircraft have cleared.

HOW IT WORKS



AN OLD RUNWAY IS NEW AGAIN

Sea-Tac Airport's longest and oldest runway, the 11,901-foot 34 Right/16 Left, is being completely rebuilt this summer for the first time since its initial construction in 1944. The \$80 million project is expected to be complete by the end of September.