

# Airport customs expands as F1 fan arrivals loom

With an influx of international race fans set to begin arriving Tuesday, workers have completed an expansion of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport's customs facility that will double its capacity.

The city's Aviation Department, working with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, on Friday finished a project to increase from four to eight the number of processing stations at the customs facility on the airport terminal's east side. The facility also was redesigned to allow arriving passengers on international flights, who previously had to clear a customs checkpoint before and after getting their luggage, to pick up their bags first and go through only one line.

The changes will allow agents to clear 150 to 170 passengers an hour through customs — flights with predominately foreign nationals on board take longer to process, officials said — up from 80 to 120 an hour before the expansion.

Airport officials said a fourth security checkpoint will open early Tuesday. That station — east of the ticketing lobby — will have two security lines Tuesday, airport spokesman Jason Zielinski said, and another two by Sunday when race fans begin to depart.

Fifty-eight international charters and private flights will be coming in over the next few days for the Formula One weekend, airport officials said.

“Traffic will start picking up Wednesday,” said Richard Mendez, the Austin port director for the federal customs agency. “Our biggest day will be Thursday. We're all ready.”

The airport expects one international private flight Tuesday, six Wednesday, 19 Thursday, 21 Friday, four Saturday and one Sunday, airport officials said. Permits for six more in the two days after the race have also been issued, or are pending approval, they said.

The airport issued 240 permits for charters and private planes in the coming days, Zielinski said, including the 58 originating from foreign airports. Some of the 182 domestic flights could be planes that began their trips overseas, landed and cleared customs elsewhere in the U.S., and then came here.

The bulk of the foreign flights will be relatively short hops. More than two-thirds of the foreign flights are from Mexico, according to figures from the airport, and the rest are from such places as Canada, England, Spain, Switzerland and Guatemala.

Most of those planes will be small private flights with a dozen or fewer passengers, and customs likely will process many of them at the two fixed-based operator terminals on the south end of the airfield belonging to Atlantic Aviation and Signature Flight Support, officials said.

The expanded facility in the main terminal will handle several larger charters, as well as the regularly scheduled flights from Cancun, Mexico.

Mendez expects a few planes with as many as 150 passengers. He said his agency will temporarily post additional customs agents to Austin to handle the load.

The customs facility expansion, which cost about \$250,000 and took only a couple of months, likely will be in place for about three years. The Austin City Council in October approved a \$6.3 million design contract for what would be a four-story, 40,000-square-foot addition to the terminal — construction should cost another \$40 million or so — that would permanently expand the customs capacity to 350 passengers an hour or more.

That project, Austin officials hope, could draw regular European airline flights to and from Austin, but would also speed the handling of F1-related arrivals in future years.

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