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Disaster Takes Toll On Queens Businesses

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A parking lot near LaGuardia Airport that typically has 180 vehicles had four new customers yesterday.

Usually full of semiconductors, fresh seafood, chemicals and other products, Nippon Cargo's outgoing flights this week were half-full.

Ultimate Aircraft Appearance, a company that contracts with airlines to wash and wax planes, had no business last week and few calls this week.

While the World Trade Center disaster has devastated the country's airline industry — with potential layoffs reaching 100,000 nationwide — smaller Queens County businesses that supply and service the airports will also suffer.

"Are people going to be standing in the bread line?" asked Marie Nahikian, executive director of the Queens County Overall Economic Development Corp. "No, [but] I think people will have much less disposable income."

Nahikian predicted that airport-related cutbacks would impact Queens' economy, but would not be staggering because, "we have a diverse economy, jobs in many different sectors."

Aviation-related jobs have turned the industry into the fourth-largest employer in Queens County, with the two airports alone employing 46,000 people — over 8 percent of the county's workforce. Airport jobs pulled in $9.3 billion in 2000, according to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates the airports.

Another 270,000 airport-related jobs across the city — from caterers to electricians to parking lot attendants — depend on the airports for some or all of their income, according to the Center for an Urban Future, a Manhattan think tank. The center estimates the airports have a combined $30.1 billion regional economic impact.



Newsday Photo / John Paraskevas

"The economic impact has been severe, to say the least," said Jim Sparro, a co-owner of Air Park Airport Systems, above, at a lot he runs near Kennedy Airport. "If the people are afraid to travel, these guys [terrorists] win."

"An awful lot of businesses supported by the airline industry are going to be drastically affected," said Dolores Hofman, program manager of the Queens Air Services Development Office, which matches the airline industry's needs for goods and services with local businesses. Even if they survive, "the airlines will be purchasing less."

Air Park Airport Systems, which owns the now-empty parking lots near LaGuardia and Kennedy airports, has already seen its revenue disappear.

"The economic impact has been severe, to say the least," said company co-owner Jim Sparro, who employs 20 people. "I don't know what the public is going to do. If the people are afraid to travel, these guys [terrorists] win."

While Nippon Cargo Airlines has a four-day backlog of cargo in Asia waiting to be transported to the United States, the company's outbound 747 aircraft were not full this week, said Peter Diefenbach, Nippon's assistant director of sales.

The company shipped 50,000 tons of cargo last year, but company officials are not convinced that the disaster will keep its customers from shipping as much product this year.

"We have another week or so before we know which way this is going to go," Diefenbach said.

The potential long-term losses are unknown, said the state labor department's Jim Brown, because they depend on the return of passengers, the elimination of restrictions on cargo in passenger planes and the amount of federal aid airlines receive.

"We haven't had any layoffs, only announcements," said Brown, a labor market analyst who focuses on the city.

While Mayor Rudolph Giuliani agreed yesterday that the disaster will likely have a significant impact, he said, "we are going to get through . . . people should start thinking much more optimistically than they are."

Authentico catering company's Myra and Craig Dalland appear to have taken the mayor's advice, turning their Long Island City firm into a haven for their former employer, Manhattan caterer Mikael Moller. With the Dallands still supplying their own clients in the Hamptons, Florida and elsewhere, they have welcomed Moller and his 10 kitchen staffers to Authentico. They continue to cook for this weekend's clients, mostly family gatherings.

"The business is suffering, but it has nothing to do with everyone's suffering," said Moller, who has not returned to his Chambers Street kitchen.

Although Authentico could not deliver some of its mail orders because of delays with the nation's delivery companies, business has not declined much, said Myra Dalland.

In the past several days, business has actually increased because Manhattan companies working overtime to rebuild their businesses increased their catering orders. When roadblocks threatened to derail deliveries, Craig Dalland hopped on his motorcycle and delivered food to his weary clients.

"We were lucky to be in Long Island City," said Myra Dalland. "You could see the hole in the towers. We knew there was nothing we could do."

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