WITH EYE ON FUTURE ASIA FLIGHTS, LAS VEGAS AIRPORT TO GROW

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Las Vegas plans to double the number of international gates at McCarran International Airport with the expectation that foreign travel to the destination will climb as officials seek out prized direct flights, particularly with Asia.

McCarran International Airport director Rosemary Vassiliadis said that construction to convert part of an existing link between its D concourse and one of its two terminals into seven additional international gates would begin later this year.

Among the new gates would be one to accommodate a wide-body double-decker A-380 aircraft for the first time at the airport.

"We don't want them to think they can't come here," she said of the airlines flying the massive passenger planes.

Vassiliadis announced construction of the new gates at a meeting of the Southern Nevada Tourism Infrastructure Committee, a governor-appointed panel of tourism officials and elected

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leaders that will eventually determine what travel-related projects needs to be funded by the next legislative session.

The airport had nearly 43 million passengers last year, making it's the ninth busiest airport in the U.S., still far from a 47.7 million passenger peak in 2007.

Boosting foreign travel has been a goal of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority. Foreigners accounted for 19 percent of the more than 40 million people who visited the gambling destination last year, according to the agency's visitor surveys. The number has risen 3 percentage points in three years ago.

Rossi Ralenkotter, the authority's president and CEO, has said it's a goal to increase international travel, including a possible program directed specifically at boosting Chinese travel. There are no direct flights to Las Vegas from China as well as Japan.

Asked by Kim Sinatra with Wynn Resorts Ltd. why airports such as Boston's Logan International Airport could land direct flights to Asia and Las Vegas couldn't, Vassiliadis said Boston offered financial incentives for the flights.

"It will be interesting to see if the flights stay when the subsidy goes away," she said, adding it's a "very, very risky business to get into."

Design and construction on the extra gates is expected to cost US$51 million and the project is expected to be finished by late 2016 or early 2017.

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