Last week, the day after it opened, I had the opportunity to visit the new 519-room Westin Hotel at Denver International Airport. The building’s architecture is striking. Together with the adjacent main airport terminal, it is a shining example of what can be produced in a free enterprise market, operating under a government that adheres to the principles of democracy and is protected by a modern national military and competent local police forces.

Denver International Airport (DIA) opened on February 28, 1995 – 20 years ago – after years of studies, negotiations and planning plus six years of construction. Located 25 miles northeast of the center of Denver, it replaced the old airport, Stapleton, which was much closer to town but lacked room for growth because of its location. Having reached maximum capacity, that historic airport had to be mothballed and replaced.

Under the leadership of Mayor Federico Peña (who later served as U.S. secretary of transportation under President Bill Clinton) and a group of dedicated Denver citizens, 53 square miles of land were acquired and annexed to the city, instantly making it the future home of the largest commercial airport in the continental United States. The official groundbreaking took place on November 22, 1989.

In 1997, Outrigger Enterprises joined John Fitts and Outrigger Lodging Services to design and construct a 157-room Hilton Garden Inn just off of Pena Boulevard, the main highway to Denver International Airport. I joined in the groundbreaking on a cold, dark February morning and, as I tried to push my ceremonial shovel into the frozen, snow-covered soil, I thought, “Richard, you must be crazy to take on a project like this in this part of the world.”

The Hilton Garden Inn Denver Airport opened in November 1999, and it has done very well. Outrigger Enterprises is still a minority owner and this Monday morning (December 7), I will be at the hotel to review the proposed budget for 2016 as presented for the operator, OLS Hotels & Resorts, by John Fitts and Martti Mannoja.

Since 1999, any number of additional hotels, ranging from 100 to 200 rooms, have opened near DIA. Almost all the top franchise brands are represented. The rooms are needed and occupancy is good because Colorado’s healthy business climate and first-class airport facilities have been an important element of the striking economic growth that has increased local job opportunities over the past two decades.
The new Westin hotel at DIA hopes to focus on the corporate meetings market. Conceivably, a company could hold a face-to-face meeting of all its North American representatives at the Westin DIA without the cost or distraction of going 25 miles into downtown Denver. The Westin DIA has 37,000 square feet of conference space in 20 rooms and can handle banquets of up to 2,000 seats.

The question many ask is, “Now they’ve built it. Will they come?” I think they will. The total annual passenger count at DIA has gone from about 36 million in 1996 to a projection of nearly 55 million this year. A light rail service will shortly begin operations, which will make it easier and more economical to travel between the heart of Denver and the airport (and the hotel). The metropolitan Denver economy continues to stand out as one of the nation’s healthiest, with many clusters of Colorado companies focused on aerospace, aviation, bioscience, energy and technology.

Airport. Prosperity. Which is the chicken and which the egg? Neither. I believe they are synergistic. Together, they produce a result greater than either could alone.

With that thought, the State of Hawai‘i should take a look at its own airport facilities. This was brought home to me recently when I took a direct flight from Kona International Airport to Denver International Airport. The facilities at KOA were designed for interisland flights and they are nowhere up to international standards.

Don’t take my word for it. See what customers post on travel sites like Yelp.

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“Ugh! I LOVE the Big Island but I can’t stand this airport. The TSA line is a true test of patience! Standing there in the blazing sun in some spots is torture. There are a few spots where a big fan is plopped, eh, maybe two fans?!”
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“Another gotcha is, depending on your flight, you should consider buying food in the terminal and either eat it there or on the plane. The planes cannot replenish the catering from Kona because the airport does not have the facilities. So you get stuck with chip/cracker/candy options on the flight.”
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“Worst airport waiting experience ever! Picture hot, muggy environment with loud jet engines nearby. No indoor air conditioned buildings. All open air, which would be fine if there was actually a breeze to cool things off. I think this airport is in need of an update BADLY. The accommodations exceed maximum capacity.”
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“It is really, really country. This is what airports 50-60 years ago were probably like. It makes me feel like technology doesn’t exist. NO AIR CONDITIONING. On the hottest days of the summer, remember to bring a bag of ice with you to the airport so that you don’t get overheated.”
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“Kona Airport? OMG!”
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Some travelers like the quaint, tropical atmosphere of Kona International Airport, but a significant number do not. Hawai‘i had better start paying more attention to its customers. There are some great lessons to be learned from what they write and say.

We can and must build better terminal facilities at Kona Airport so we can be proud to call it “International.”

If not, I can almost guarantee “If we don’t build it, they won’t come.”