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Industry officials explore ways to speed air travel

By PETER PAE
Los Angeles Times

LAS VEGAS | In this most miserable year ever for airline passengers — a year of record flight delays and baggage mishandling — hope is on the horizon.

One solution: an airport where the only people are the passengers. That possibility and technology designed to speed voyagers to their destinations were presented last week at a conference of airport and airline officials here, providing tantalizing glimpses of a traveling future with fast-moving check-in lines and luggage tracked using radio signals.

The **Schiphol Airport** in Amsterdam, Netherlands, is floating a vision of travelers lined up at self-service kiosks where they would check in, tag their bags, drop them into luggage chutes, select their seats and print out boarding passes.

In about five years, there will be hardly any counters with humans behind them, Schiphol officials predict.

"It'll be highly efficient," Marcel van Beek, the airport's program manager for passenger process, said shortly after unveiling the plan at the **Mandalay Bay Events Center**.

Titled Check-in 2007, the conference is noteworthy because it comes at a time when flight delays and mishandled baggage are at their worst since the federal government began tracking the issues in 1995, and some aviation analysts don't see much relief ahead.

"People don't think flying is a whole lot of fun anymore," said Charles "Duffy" Mees, chief information officer for **JetBlue Airways Corp.**

Airport officials acknowledge that they cannot prevent flight delays, but they can do something about alleviating travelers' frustrations.

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"We can at least try to make the airport experience a positive one," said Randall W. Walker, head of Las Vegas' **McCarran International Airport**.

In an exhibit hall, about 20 companies showcased new machines and devices that airport officials hope can help keep check-in lines moving.

One company, Edinburgh, Scotland-based **Mobiqa Ltd.**, developed computer software that would enable cell phone users to receive an image of a bar code, similar to ones found on boarding passes. The passenger would then simply pass the cell phone under an image-reading device to check in or board a plane.

The technology is being tested in Canada but cannot be used in the U.S., at least for now. The **Transportation Security Administration** still requires a paper boarding pass.

Many of the ideas discussed at the conference seemed remote. But the Schiphol plan appears close to liftoff, airport officials said.

At the Amsterdam airport, a machine would scan a passenger's passport and then show the flight information on a display screen. The traveler would be able to select a seat and print out a luggage tag, which the passenger would attach before placing it in a chute next to the self-service kiosk.

The bag tag would contain a tiny radio transponder, enabling the luggage to be tracked more accurately. The airline would know immediately whether a bag made it on a particular flight.

Schiphol officials expect that, by 2015, about 90 percent of its passengers would use the self-service machines, allowing the airport to handle a 50 percent increase in travelers while reducing the typical time in line by 10 percent.