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Airports chief seeks more high-end shops

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BY [FRAN SPIELMAN](#) City Hall Reporter

O'Hare Airport needs more full-service restaurants and high-end retail to occupy the 58 percent share of passengers waiting for connecting flights, a top mayoral aide said Friday.

Newly appointed Aviation Commissioner Nuria Fernandez fleshed out her retail vision for O'Hare after a City Council committee approved six new O'Hare concessions contracts -- the first to be awarded in nearly two years.

Together, the concessions are expected to generate \$6.2 million in annual revenue. They include Sunglass Hut; Spirit of the Red Horse, selling Native American jewelry and gifts; Hoypoloi, featuring hand-made arts and crafts; Airport Wireless, selling PDAs and other wireless video electronics; a clothing store known as Wild Fire Harley-Davidson/Buell and Oakley Air, featuring clothing, eyeglasses, shoes and small electronics.

As Fernandez continues to replace expired O'Hare concessions with long-term agreements, she's looking for even more upscale choices -- including a spa, a gourmet supermarket and, possibly, more healthy food choices.

"We will be looking for more sit-down restaurants. Fifty-eight percent of our travelers are connecting passengers. They're looking for an area where they can relax in anticipation of their maybe two-, three-hour layover. We're looking for opportunities that will give them that space, that ambience they should have as they wait for their next flight," she said.

"We will continue to have fast food because we also have a percentage of our travelers who just want to grab and go . . . But better utilization of space will allow us to introduce some of these family-style, sit-down areas and also bring some high-end retail to the airport so we can serve all levels of passengers [with] arts and crafts, clothing -- things you don't typically find at airports."

Currently, O'Hare has just three full-service restaurants with waiters and waitresses: Chili's, Wolfgang Puck's and Fox Sports Skybox. There are six high-end retailers: Brookstone; Landau Jeweler; Mont Blanc; Sunglass Hut; Wilson's Leather and Spirit of the Red Horse.

'Fabulous things'

"We look at airports around the country and there are some fabulous things taking place. We want to bring that same energy to O'Hare," Fernandez said.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported earlier this year that 60 percent of airport merchants, including a pair of clout-heavy mayoral allies, were operating on expired contracts.

Airport concessions have been a constant source of patronage and controversy during Mayor Daley's 17-year administration -- and the expired O'Hare contracts added another chapter to that story. The longer the expired deals are allowed to drag on without competition, the more it stands to benefit political heavyweights.

On Friday, Fernandez insisted that clout is not the reason 16 of the 27 concession agreements have expired and six others have been extended beyond their initial termination dates.

Instead, she blamed a federally mandated, \$750,000 net worth ceiling for disadvantaged business enterprises and a requirement that they earn no more than \$30 million in gross revenues over a three-year period.

"A number of our DBE's certified through the city process no longer qualified under the airport's federally funded program," the commissioner said.

fspielman@suntimes.com

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