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Travelers find Pittsburgh International Airport's Airmall isn't gouging them

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Larry Moser, a businessman from Murfreesboro, Tenn., spends much of his life in airports. So he says he knows when one is gouging him.

"Things can be more expensive at airports, but Pittsburgh isn't overpriced at all," said Moser, director of airport sales for a magazine and book wholesaler, while sitting in front of a \$1.70 soda at Pittsburgh International Airport's Airmall.

"Pittsburgh is a great airport, pricewise," he said.

Since the airport's airfield terminal opened in 1992, Airmall businesses have been required to charge prices that are comparable with those of area stores and restaurants.

For the most part, they do.

A report released last month by the Allegheny County Controller's Office said 6.9 percent of the Airmall items it checked were more expensive than the so-called street prices.

The office, which audits the Airmall every two years, checked prices on 72 items and found five it labeled as overpriced. They included a Butterfinger candy bar, two sodas and a fruit bar, all 10 cents over the estimated street price, and a 12-pack of golf balls that was selling for \$24.99, three dollars higher than the street price.

This year's rate of overpriced items was the highest this decade. According to the controller's office, five of 146 items checked (3.4 percent) were overpriced in 2001, one of 91 items (1.1 percent) was overpriced in 2003, none of the 71 items was overpriced in 2005, and two of 65 items (3.1 percent) were overpriced in 2007.

"We wish (overpricing) would never happen, but there have to be tens of thousands of items for sale at the airport and sometimes it does because of the varying nature of the products' prices," said Jay Kruisselbrink, vice president of development for BAA USA, which manages the Airmall's day-to-day operations and recruits tenants.

BAA directed store owners to immediately drop the prices on the five overpriced items the county found last month, Kruisselbrink said.

Kruisselbrink added that, in addition to the controller's office, Airmall prices are monitored by the Allegheny County Airport Authority. BAA hires an outside company, Customer Service Consultants, to conduct annual price surveys. CSC found that 39 of 954 items checked in a December survey, or 4 percent of them, were overpriced.

BAA has a hotline — 1-800-ITS-FAIR (1-800-487-3247) — for customers to call if they spot an overpriced item, though Kruisselbrink said it typically receives fewer than 20 calls a year.

Adam and Leslie Bentley of Naples, Fla., had no complaints with their \$26.02 tab at O'Brien's Grille and Pub on Wednesday. It covered a chicken citrus salad (\$9.59) potato skins with bacon and cheddar cheese (\$7.49), a large Diet Pepsi (\$2.29) and a pint of Yuengling draft beer (\$4.95).

"We're from Naples, so this is cheap," said Adam Bentley, an Avella native.

Kruisselbrink said street pricing has been good for business.

"We don't do it because we're nice people," Kruisselbrink said. "We do it because it's good business. If people feel like they're being ripped off, they won't spend money."

As a result, Kruisselbrink said, the Airmall had the highest level of per-passenger spending in the country last year, at \$13.60. That was up from \$13.55 in 2007 and \$13.21 in 2006.

Aside from street pricing, Kruisselbrink attributed the bump to passengers spending more time in the Airmall and competition that forces businesses to "be on their game" in trying to attract customers. Passengers average 1 hour, 15 minutes in the Airmall before catching departing flights, up 20 minutes from when Pittsburgh was largely a connecting hub for US Airways five years ago, he said. Closing off the ends of the A and B concourses has helped keep passengers closer to the terminal's core, where most of the businesses are.

Still, sales have fallen dramatically this decade, from a record \$89 million in 2001 to \$66.5 million in 2007 and \$60 million last year, a drop Kruisselbrink attributed to fewer passengers. The airport had 19.9 million passengers in 2001 but a record-low 8.7 million last year.