

Berlin Brandenburg Airport

Berlin Brandenburg Airport: How Governance, Design Changes and Technical Problems Drove Years of Delay

PIA-INV-002 | Megaprojects | Published 2026-06-08

Key Facts

Cost: EUR 7B

Date: 2026-06-08

Duration: 11:55

Category: Megaprojects

Executive Summary

Berlin Brandenburg Airport was meant to open in 2011. It finally opened in 2020, costing EUR 7 billion against a EUR 2 billion budget. Ghost trains ran to empty terminals daily. Official reviews and contemporary reporting identified a combination of governance problems, design changes, technical defects, coordination failures and weaknesses in project oversight.

Executive Lessons

- Freeze the Blueprint Before You Pour Concrete

Berlin Airport suffered hundreds of design changes after construction began. Late-stage changes destroy complex systems because every modification creates cascading impacts across interconnected subsystems. Once execution begins, the design phase must end.

- Never Build and Redesign Simultaneously

The airport's smoke extraction system failed acceptance inspection weeks before the planned 2012 opening and had to be fundamentally redesigned while construction continued. The wiring was installed before the diagram was finished. Complex engineering systems cannot be redesigned while they are being built - concurrency is not efficiency, it is chaos.

- Engineers Must Be Empowered to Halt Unsafe Work

Fire-safety deficiencies were known to be critical, yet political commitment to announced opening dates persisted, according to reporting on the Berlin parliamentary inquiry. When political pressure can override engineering safety assessments, the project becomes a monument to ego rather than infrastructure.

Timeline

- 1996: Berlin, Brandenburg and the federal government agree to build a single capital-region airport adjacent to Schoenefeld Airport.
- 2004-08: The zoning decision (Planfeststellungsbeschluss) for the new Berlin Brandenburg International Airport is issued, fixing the regulatory basis for construction.
- 2006-09: Construction formally begins with the ground-breaking ceremony at Schoenefeld; the airport is budgeted at roughly EUR 2.4 billion and planned to open in 2011.
- 2010-06: First postponement: the planned 30 October 2011 opening is abandoned and moved to 3 June 2012.
- 2012-05-08: Less than four weeks before the planned opening, the inauguration is cancelled because the fire-protection and smoke-extraction systems are not functioning and cannot be approved.
- 2012: New opening dates of 17 March 2013 and then 27 October 2013 are set and abandoned; the general planner contract is terminated and the technical managing director is dismissed.
- 2013-01: FBB postpones the opening indefinitely; the smoke-extraction concept is judged a design error and must be fundamentally re-engineered.
- 2014: It emerges that the chief planner assigned to the fire-protection design was not a qualified engineer; remedial redesign of the smoke extraction and cabling is underway.
- 2015-07: The Brandenburg state audit office (Landesrechnungshof) issues its BER report criticizing shareholder

supervision, hasty opening-date decisions and missing internal controls.

- 2017: The Berlin parliament's first inquiry committee publishes its final report (Drs. 17/3000); the announced 2017 opening target is abandoned as costs pass EUR 6 billion.
- 2017-12: FBB's supervisory board sets October 2020 as the new opening target - the seventh public opening date.
- 2018-06: The Abgeordnetenhaus establishes the second BER inquiry committee to investigate the continuing cost and schedule overruns.
- 2020-10-31: Berlin Brandenburg Airport 'Willy Brandt' finally opens, nine years late and at roughly three times the original budget (about EUR 7 billion overall against an initial EUR 2.4 billion).
- 2021-07: The second inquiry committee presents its final report attributing the delays and cost tripling to management and supervisory-board failures and describing FBB's catastrophic financial situation.

Sources

- Bericht des 2. Untersuchungsausschusses zur Aufklaerung der Ursachen, Konsequenzen und Verantwortung fuer die Kosten- und Terminueberschreitungen des Flughafens BER (Abschlussbericht, Drs. 18/4010) (Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin (2nd parliamentary inquiry committee, 18th electoral period), 2021-07)
- Abschlussbericht des 1. Untersuchungsausschusses 'BER I' (Drs. 17/3000) (Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin (1st parliamentary inquiry committee, 17th electoral period), 2017)
- Gutachten zur Wahrnehmung staatlicher Aufsicht ueber die Flughafen Berlin Brandenburg GmbH (excerpt, Jahresbericht/Pruefbericht zum BER) (Landesrechnungshof Brandenburg (excerpt hosted by Buendnis 90/Die Gruenen-Fraktion Brandenburg), 2015-07)
- On 31 October 2020 Berlin Brandenburg Airport opened (Bundesregierung (Federal Government of Germany, official website), 2020-10-30)
- Berlin's Brandenburg airport to open October 2020, nine years late (Global Construction Review, 2019-12-02)