



The Times

Loftiest of ideals is falling through

Big Sky Airlines ending its service at Trenton-Mercer

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BY ANDREW KITCHENMAN

EWING -- Big Sky Airlines will stop flying to and from Trenton- Mercer Airport on Jan. 7, ending a yearlong attempt by Delta Air Lines-affiliated carriers to fly from the airport.

Big Sky is canceling all of its Boston-based East Coast service, including three daily flights from Trenton to Boston. Big Sky is the latest in a series of airlines that have tried and failed at the airport, with the past dozen years seeing a succession of unsuccessful attempts.

Big Sky, headquartered in Billings, Mont., served as a contract carrier for Delta at Trenton-Mercer beginning on Sept. 16, taking over for Delta's Comair subsidiary.

The company cited "severe financial distress due to continuing, extensive and unsustainable losses" in the Northeast corridor as the reason for closing the service in a notice filed with the U.S. Department of Transportation in Washington, D.C.

Trenton-Mercer still has one commercial airline, which also flies to an airport near Boston. Boston- Maine Airways flies the Pan Am Clipper Connection to Hanscom Field in Bedford, Mass., with a connection to Portsmouth, N.H. It has operated since March 2004.

When Comair announced in August 2006 that it would fly to both Boston's Logan International Airport and Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport from Trenton- Mercer, area officials hailed its potential to revive passenger service at the airport.

After Comair's Delta Connection started flying Dec. 15, 2006, it found that it wasn't able to generate enough business to sustain the routes. When Delta's service shifted carriers, the flights to Atlanta ended and the airplanes changed from Comair's 50-seat jets to Big Sky's 19-seat turboprop planes.

Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes expressed disappointment with Delta for not advertising more or offering lower prices for the flights, which are largely used by business travelers.

"I don't think they promoted the Delta Connection as well as they could have, or Big Sky Airlines," Hughes said.

The county will keep six months of rent from Big Sky, but stands to lose \$70,000 per year on the lease if the airline isn't replaced.

County officials said Delta would notify passengers who have already booked flights with Big Sky from Trenton-Mercer and give them refunds or arrange alternative transportation.

Hughes said the news of Big Sky's departure was surprising.

"We had always heard that this was the most successful route in the eastern operation" for Big Sky, Hughes said.

Big Sky President Fred deLeeuw said the Trenton-to-Boston route was doing very well but that it was just one small piece of his company's East Coast operation.

"It's very difficult to decide that you must shut down your whole business," deLeeuw said.

DeLeeuw said bad weather, disappointing revenue and record- high fuel prices plagued the company's eastern operations.

"We have great people who worked extraordinarily hard, but that factor could not overcome the challenges we faced, and we no longer believe that we can reach sustained profitability," he said.

Big Sky will shut down completely in January if it doesn't find a buyer, the Billings, Mont., Gazette reported Friday.

With the loss of the airline, the county will look to increase charter flights or private use of the facility, Hughes said.

"We're going to have to look at even more creative ways to make this airport work," he said.

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