



The Times

Officials still optimistic about airport

Thursday, January 31, 2008

BY ANDREW KITCHENMAN

EWING -- While 2007 may have ended on a down note for Trenton- Mercer Airport, Mercer County officials remain optimistic that the airport can serve as an economic engine for the area.

County Executive Brian M. Hughes points to long-term trends to explain why he sees a bright future for the facility, saying that demand for air travel has grown during times that were both good and bad for the economy.

In both good and bad times for the economy, "I have never seen a significant drop in the growth of people wanting to travel by air," Hughes said.

The airport lost two affiliates of Delta Air Lines over the past year: its subsidiary Comair, which left in May, and Big Sky Airlines, which replaced Comair but left earlier this month.

However, the airport does have one commercial airline that remains: Boston-Maine Airways' Pan Am Clipper Connection. Boston- Maine flies to Hanscom Field in Bedford, Mass., while the Delta affiliates flew to nearby Boston's Logan International Airport.

Boston-Maine spokeswoman Stacy Beck said the airline has seen increased interest from customers who were using Big Sky.

"Our flights out of Trenton have been great," Beck said of the local interest.

When asked if Boston-Maine is looking to add flights out of Trenton-Mercer, Beck would only say that the airline is always looking for opportunities for growth.

While Hughes didn't minimize the importance of Big Sky's departure, he noted that it was caused by the overall failure of the company. Big Sky's flights out of Trenton were successful.

"That was a case of an entire company going out of business," Hughes said.

Shortly after announcing Big Sky's departure from Trenton, company President Fred deLeeuw said the Trenton-to-Boston route was successful but that it was just one small piece of his company's operations.

Eleven airlines have come and gone at the airport in the past 21 years, but Hughes remains optimistic looking to 2008 and beyond that Trenton-Mercer will draw a market.

He noted the jammed schedules at Newark Liberty International Airport and Philadelphia Airport, adding that they may force airlines to look at Trenton-Mercer.

"I'm wondering when there's going to be some spillover for a smaller, regional airport," Hughes said.

One prominent county official would like to see more private flights but is skeptical of commercial airlines.

Lucy Walter, the new chairwoman of the county freeholder board, sees the area around the airlines as a prime target for health- services offices due to the impending relocation of a Capital Health System campus in neighboring Hopewell Township from Trenton.

"Those properties that have long been slated for non-aviation uses are a logical place for them," Walter said.

The airport has seen the number of passengers on commercial flights drop in recent years, from 152,566 in 2000 to 18,677 in 2006. The number for last year is not yet available, according to airport officials.

Contact Andrew Kitchenman at akitchenman@njtimes.com or (609) 989-5706.

© 2008 The Times of Trenton

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.