



The Times

Trenton-Mercer losing carrier

Financial woes ground airline

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BY ANDREW KITCHENMAN

EWING -- For the first time in nearly 13 years, Trenton-Mercer Airport will be without commercial service, effective Feb. 29, when Boston-Maine Airways' Pan Am Clipper Connection suspends its flights.

The federal Department of Transportation filed an order on Feb. 1, proposing to revoke Boston-Maine's certificate to fly. The department cited the Portsmouth, N.H.-based company's poor financial conditions, a false financial report filed in 2002 and questions raised about its managers' competence.

It is the second blow this winter for commercial service at the airport, following the decision by Delta Air Lines' Big Sky affiliate to stop flights on Jan. 7. Big Sky had taken over from Comair in September after that airline found its jet service from the airport wasn't profitable.

Boston-Maine spokeswoman Stacy Beck said the final flights would be on Feb. 29 and declined to comment further on the federal order.

"We're certainly disappointed with the order," she said.

Beck said the airline hoped to fly from Trenton-Mercer Airport again in the future. When Big Sky announced its departure in December, Beck said that Boston-Maine had success with its sole route from Trenton-Mercer to Hanscom Field in Bedford, Mass. The airline operated one other route, from Bedford to Portsmouth International Airport.

Mercer County officials struck a hopeful tone.

"The county plans to do whatever it can to get Boston-Maine through this," county spokeswoman Julie Willmot said.

Willmot said County Executive Brian M. Hughes is concerned about the disruption in service and would work with Boston-Maine to help it succeed should it return.

If the airline doesn't return, the county will work to find other ways to use the airport, such as increasing private and business flights, Willmot said.

Boston-Maine started flying 19-seat Jetstream turboprop planes from the airport in March 2004.

However, the company's problems began earlier -- in 2002 -- when it applied to fly Boeing 727s commercially. In its application, the company stated that its parent company, Pan American Airlines Inc., would extend it a \$750,000 line of credit. However, the Department of Transportation found that the parent company didn't have the financial ability to provide the credit.

Pan Am has different owners than the international airline that collapsed in 1991.

The airline also faced opposition from the Air Line Pilots Association, a union that alleged the company had violated federal labor law.

Federal authorities later determined that the information in the 2002 application was falsified and that the company was in poor financial shape.

The severity of Boston-Maine's financial situation "has inhibited the air carrier's ability to maintain an adequate number of necessary personnel, has likely had a negative impact on consumer refunds and has caused the air carrier to significantly scale back its operations," according to the federal order.

The order also said that company President David Fink should have been aware that other company officials submitted the false information.

The company has until March 3 to file a response.

A dozen airlines have failed at the airport since 1983, ranging from major carriers like United Airlines to smaller companies like Shuttle America and Colgan. The last interruption in commercial service lasted from June 1994, when Colgan left, to June 1995, when Eastwind Airlines arrived.

But it has been the corporate customers who have been the financial backbone of the airport.

In 2006, for example, there were 95,509 takeoffs and landings at the airport, with commercial airline flights accounting for only about 12 percent of that total.

The roster of large corporate clients maintaining hangar space at Trenton-Mercer includes Johnson & Johnson, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Pfizer, Unisys and Amerata Hess.

Several people at the airport yesterday expressed disappointment with the news.

Hopewell Township resident Suzann Mohacsi feels its effect doubly: not only does she use the airline frequently, but her son Nicholas works for Boston-Maine at the airport, after working for Shuttle America previously.

East Windsor resident Michael Henderson was at the airport watching the flights leave and arrive, which he enjoys as a hobby. He said he was impressed with Boston-Maine and was disappointed to learn they were leaving.

"Boston-Maine was right on time. Delta had a lot of delays," said Henderson, who expressed hope that commercial service to the Boston area would continue in some form.

West Chester, Pa., resident Ann Barnes was meeting her mother Susan Sullivan at the airport yesterday. Sullivan started using it when she lived in Bucks County, Pa., and continued to use it after she moved to Lexington, Mass.

"It was very reliable," Barnes said, adding that, "if people knew about it, they would probably use it."

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