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Name deal nears for Williams Gateway

Airline says service pact hinges on change; authority yet to vote

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A name change for Mesa's Williams Gateway Airport appears to be a done deal even though a vote on the controversial proposal doesn't take place for another month.

Switching to Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, which would remove Williams as a reference to the airport's historic military past, is part of an agreement between the airport and an airline that plans to start service from the airport to 13 markets.

"The agreement is predicated on the name change," Tyri Squyres, spokeswoman for Allegiant Air LLC, said Thursday. "The airport made the suggestion of the name and all we had requested is that Phoenix be in it. We're confident that the airport authority can make changes to make this successful."

But two members of the airport authority said Thursday that they were unaware that the agreement includes such a condition and said it sounds as if Allegiant is trying to intimidate the board.

"Nobody likes to be bullied," said airport authority President and Gilbert Mayor Steve Berman. Board member and Mesa Mayor Keno Hawker called it "putting pressure on" that doesn't gain anything.

The name-change proposal is facing protests from hundreds of Arizona residents who were stationed or employed as civilians at the airport's predecessor, Williams Air Force Base. For more than 60 years, the airport and the base have bore the name of Lt. Charles L. Williams, a practically unknown soldier who died in 1927.

Although the airport's five-member governing authority is not scheduled to vote on the agreement with Allegiant until Aug. 21, the carrier on Thursday announced that it would start flights to Rockford International Airport outside of Chicago in November.

Berman called the announcement "an incredible leap of faith on their part."

He said airport officials have never implied that the name change is a foregone conclusion. He called it a proposal and said that will be subject to debate at the authority's Sept. 17 meeting where a formal vote on the name change is likely.

Airport spokesman Brian Sexton said the staff is on board with the proposed change and came to that decision after much consideration and realization that it's an emotional issue.

But ardent opponents such as Joe Martin were not buying it.

"It sounds like the airlines are applying a lot of pressure," said Martin, a former Air Force colonel who was assigned by the Base Closure and Realignment Commission in 1994 to oversee the closing of Williams Air Force Base so it could be turned into a civilian airport.

"If airport officials went back to the airlines and said we got pressure from the community not to change the name they would still come," Martin said. "The name of an airport doesn't bring or breed success. It's the management, the location, flight schedules, access and other things that attract passengers and airline service."

Airport officials said they have been urged by airlines companies since 2001 to include Phoenix in the name as a marketing tool that would potentially reach millions of prospective passengers.

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Get over it people. You cannot hold onto name just because you were born or conceived at the base. The base is long gone. Change the name and give it more exposure to rest of the world. The name change will be a lot better for growth of "Phoenix-Mesa" airport and surrounding areas.

Allegiant Air is being smart if they are asking for a name change. They are a business and it will be a whole lot better for them if this name change goes through. Or do we want them shutting down services at this airport just like Western and Skyvalue airlines? Think about it for a minute - If you were told that we have a service to Gary airport, you would go huh? Where? Whereas if you were told we have a service to Gary Chicago airport, it tells you where the airport is. It just makes more sense.

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It should be called, "Arizona is for Jerks Airport" in honor of its residents.

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I agree that the name change makes sense. People outside the Phoenix metro area would not have a clear idea where the airport is and whether it would meet their needs.

For the sake of keeping the name, the terminal could be named Williams Terminal, just at Terminal 4 at Phoenix Sky Harbor is named the Barry Goldwater Terminal.

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