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New flights from Mesa airport in the works

By Donna Hogan
Tribune

Mesa vacationers could be flying direct to Southern California by year end. On Friday, Vision Air, Williams Gateway Airport's first scheduled passenger service carrier, snagged a couple of slots at Long Beach (Calif.) Airport, said Warren Kaplan, the airline's general manager. Kaplan said those slots are pegged for providing daily service to and from Williams Gateway.

Las Vegas-based Vision Air, previously licensed solely as a charter carrier, which limited the number of scheduled flights a week on any route, earned its expanded license from the U.S. Department of Transportation in April.

The Federal Aviation Administration still has to give its approval before Vision Air can begin daily flights, Kaplan said, but "that's a when, not an if," he said.

If the FAA gives its blessing by fall, Vision Air will start the Southern California-Mesa service before year end, he said.

Even sooner, the company plans to expand its flights between Williams Gateway and North Las Vegas. The company plans to add a midweek roundtrip before Sept. 1, Kaplan said. Currently Vision Air flies round-trips between the East Valley airport and Sin City on Fridays and Sundays.

Having a midweek flight will make the service out of Williams Gateway even more popular, said Robert Brinton, executive director of the Mesa Convention & Visitors Bureau, since it lets people plan a three- or four-day mini-vacation without the hassle of flying in and out of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

But Brinton is even more excited about the long-awaited service between Williams Gateway and Southern California.

"When planes go to Las Vegas they take (Valley residents) there and back. Not a lot of Las Vegas people come here," Brinton said. "But with Southern California service, it will be a much more even distribution of passengers."

While any scheduled passenger service out of Williams Gateway is a boon for local residents, it's the inbound passenger who stays in hotels and boosts other tourism-related businesses in the East Valley, Brinton said.

"We're very pleased about this," he said. "Vision always planned to bring new markets to us. We're glad it's happening."

Vision Air started regularly scheduled service between Williams Gateway and North Las Vegas in April 2006. Two startup carriers, Western and SkyValue, launched service from Williams Gateway early this year, but both folded within a few weeks. SkyValue had been planning to add a southern California leg to its service between Mesa and Gary, Ind., before it ran out of money.

"That was a disappointment, but not unexpected (for a startup)," Brinton said.

No startup, Vision Air has been a proven profitable provider of service from Williams Gateway for more than a year, airport spokesman Brian Sexton said.

"This is exciting," Sexton said. "Vision has always been dedicated to servicing the needs of Valley fliers."

Sexton said the top three hoped-for destinations named by local residents in a Web survey are Las Vegas, the Los Angeles area and San Diego. Vision Air has honed in on the top three by picking a Southern California spot to land its new service, he said.

Vision Air had also been planning to provide passenger service out of Scottsdale Airport, but Kaplan said for now, that's on the back burner.



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