

Sunday Business

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CHANGE IN THE OFFING: Williams Gateway Airport in Mesa, as seen in the photos at right and below, is adding new flights and even airlines monthly.

PHOTOS BY TORU KAWANA, TRIBUNE

On wings of change

Williams Gateway gradually growing into a major economic force in the Valley

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TRIBUNE

Williams Gateway is becoming a real airport.

The emerging Mesa air hub — for a half-century the centerpiece of a thriving Air Force base that ended up a casualty of the nationwide base closures of the 1990s — is poised to become a major economic engine for the East Valley.

With an employment base of 90 businesses, more than 4,600 employees, branches of five educational institutions, including Arizona State University, and an annual economic impact of \$420 million, the airport area is expected to generate more than 100,000 jobs and evolve into one of Maricopa County's top economic centers by 2035. That's according to a demographic snapshot completed by research firm Claritas in June.

The airport's place in that plan is key, said Scott Butler, Mesa's acting



project leader for the Williams Gateway area.

"Businesses like to be located near an airport for transporting goods, and passenger service enhances an

area's ability to attract high-wage, high quality jobs," Butler said.

After years of trying, Williams is

Survey results

"We Need You!" survey results. These are the top destinations visitors to Williams Gateway Web site want to fly to from Mesa.

- 1) Las Vegas
- 2) San Diego
- 3) Los Angeles
- 4) Denver
- 5) Chicago
- 6) San Francisco
- 7) Honolulu
- 8) Seattle
- 9) New York City
- 10) Dallas

Access the survey on the Web site, www.flyWGA.org, click on "New Destinations?"

WILLIAMS: Airport may change its name as it grows, analyst hints

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finally attracting those passenger services. Mostly, because of limited frequency and limited routes, the flights are aimed solely at leisure travelers, not the business bunch.

But it's a huge step towards becoming a full-service airport and an alternative to busy Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, said Brian Sexton, Williams Gateway spokesman.

The more airline business that moves into Williams, the more potential travelers will stop to take a second look, he said. Williams already has huge advantages over Sky Harbor, he said, with free parking, fast check-in, security and boarding processes, and close proximity for the 1 million-plus people living in the East Valley.

"Airlines are seeing this as an option," Sexton said. "But the biggest challenge is to get people to change their travel habits."

SCHEDULED SERVICE

Williams Gateway has four regularly scheduled departures and four arrivals every week. By mid-January, that number is expected to have more than doubled to 10 or 11 round-trips per week, with the capacity to ferry more than 2,000 passengers to or from the East Valley.

Compared with Sky Harbor's average 100,000 passengers a day, Williams' traffic seems tiny, but the choice of Mesa by upstart airlines is gaining momentum, said Robert Brinton, executive director of Mesa's Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"When you look at the short time frame, the growth is significant — to get three charters this fast," Brinton said.

It took 10 years from Williams Air Force base's closure to get any commercial service. Allegiant Air, a charter carrier sent by casinos in Nevada gambling capitals Laughlin and Reno to bring customers, started the transition in 2003. Allegiant still flies weekly or monthly — depending on the season — routes packed with invitees, Sexton said.

In April, another charter, Las Vegas-based Vision Airlines, offered the first regularly scheduled service from Williams with round-trips from Mesa to North Las Vegas, Nev., on Thursday, Friday, Sunday and Monday. Vision wants to expand to daily service, but delays in deliveries of two on-order airplanes and FAA approval for a commercial carrier license have hampered plans to expand, said Leigh Kimball, Vision spokesman. Charters are limited to flying a route only four times a week.

"We wait daily for the license approval," Kimball said. "No plans have been dropped for lack of interest. We get calls daily. There's a lot of pent-up demand." Vision also has plans to add service from airports in Scottsdale and Carlsbad, Calif. to Las Vegas, and from Mesa or Scottsdale to the Grand Canyon, Kimball said.

Timing of the license approval and the plane deliveries will determine what happens first, he said, but the daily service from Mesa is on the top of the company's wish list.

Vision's 30-seat planes are packed on Friday and Sunday, he said, but Monday and Thursday business is "weak."

That won't stop expansion plans, he said.

"To build airline sales, you need frequency and schedule," Kimball said. Weekend vacationers are the primary passengers now, but daily and possibly even twice-a-day flights would make Vision a good deal for the business bunch, too, he said.

COMING SOON

On Dec. 15, a new charter, SkyValue, plans to launch twice-weekly service on 174-seat Boeing 737s between

Mesa and Gary, Ind., a south Chicago suburb. SkyValue will be leasing the planes from Elko, Nev.-based Xtra Air, a charter that flies under different banners, similar to Phoenix-based Mesa Airlines, which flies smaller hops as US Airways, Delta and other major carriers.

Florida-based SkyValue is simultaneously launching service from Gary to Mesa, Las Vegas and three destinations in Florida. The company started taking reservations less than a month ago but has already booked up lots of seats on Williams Gateway flights.

"Mesa is our most popular destination, so far," said Gabrielle Griswold, SkyValue executive vice president. "We have a 40 percent load factor (for Mesa flights), and we haven't done any advertising yet."

SkyValue is starting with a flight on Friday and Monday to catch the long-weekend vacationers, but if the bookings keep growing at a hefty pace, the company likely will add a Wednesday flight, she said.

Western, another start-up charter airline that also will lease Xtra Air's 737s, this time with a 150-seat configuration, announced just days ago that it plans to start regular winter service Jan. 19 from Williams Gateway to Bellingham (Wash.) International Airport, a location that will provide convenient getaways for those trying to escape the cold of northern Washington and British Columbia, Canada.

Western will fly four days a week and market specifically to vacationers, said Leigh-Ann Campbell, Western spokeswoman.

"We chose Williams Gateway because it fits well with our mission of supporting smaller airports," she said.

The start-up airline surveyed northern Washington people to see where they'd like to go, and the Valley was a top pick, Campbell said.

Williams Gateway did the same to find where East Valley people wanted to visit, as the airport aggressively lobbies for new air service, Sexton said.

Chicago and Seattle scored in the top 10, and Las Vegas came out No. 1, so the three airlines already signed on should be popular with local folks, too, he said.

Williams is in talks with more airlines, Sexton said, but he wouldn't say who's at the table or where they want to fly to and from.

MAYBE, MAYBE NOT

Officials at Rockford, Ill. airport previously announced plans to land flights from the north Chicago suburb to the Valley, possibly to Williams. They have still not given up on accomplishing that in the very short-term, said Rockford's deputy airport director Derek Martin.

"We are anticipating having service in the months of January to March, and hopefully we'll be able to announce that service at the end of December or first of January," Martin said.

Brinton is not so sure.

"I hope they do, but I am not so confident about it at this point," he said.

And AirTran, which has a Web-based preferred destination survey similar to the Williams Gateway version, may be looking to land flights in Williams or Sky Harbor next year.

Whether those iffy plans work out or not, Brinton is confident that more air service will be coming to the Mesa airport, but possibly not as fast as the recent sign-ups.

"Right now the economy is good, planes are available for leasing, and new model (charter airlines) are coming out," he said. "But this is a process. It will take years to develop this airport. This is the next step, but we may be at this step for quite a while. It's a long-term commitment to make this a true reliever airport for Sky Harbor. We have

to keep looking ahead."

And like it or not, there is likely one more painful step Williams Gateway will have to take to make it happen — a name change, Brinton said.

Even worse, the new name likely should include the word Phoenix.

It's something Brinton has watched happen with virtually every major hotel in the city, as they renamed themselves. "What does a customer need to make a decision to fly here? Williams Gateway doesn't mean anything," he said.

Kimball of Vision Airlines said the same. "Daily we get calls to ask, 'You're flying out of where?'"

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