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## Vision Airlines looks to expand in East Valley

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Tribune

Williams Gateway Airport in Mesa could have two scheduled air routes to southern California and two to the Midwest by fall. And people may be booking flights from Scottsdale to North Las Vegas by June. The tourist trade may have hit the summer lull, but not so the business of flying people in and out of the East Valley.

Vision Airlines, which has been ferrying passengers from Mesa to North Las Vegas for a year, is leaping into expansion mode, said Warren Kaplan, Vision's general manager.

The Las Vegas-based charter carrier has been working for two years on landing a regional airline operating certificate. A charter can fly a maximum of four scheduled flights along a single route during a week. A regional airline is only limited by the availability of routes, airport gates and enough passengers to make a flight profitable.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Department of Transportation approved Vision's certificate, and the carrier immediately set its sights on the East Valley, Kaplan said.

The Federal Aviation Administration still has to give its blessing, something that could take another couple of months, Kaplan said, but the major regulatory hurdle has been cleared.

In the meantime, Vision has resurrected and accelerated its stalled expansion plan, which was put on hold while the company concentrated on its certificate application.

First on the agenda, the carrier could be flying twice weekly trips from Scottsdale Airport to North Las Vegas by June 1, Kaplan said.

Vision officials surprised Scottsdale Airport officials with the news Tuesday, said Chris Read, the city's assistant aviation director.

He said the carrier already has terminal space leased and could move in and rev up service at any time.

Vision has even bigger plans for Williams Gateway. While it focused on the certificate application, Vision actually cut back service at the Mesa airport, halving its original four-times-a-week round-trip schedule in January.

The company may add those canceled flights back or focus on new opportunities, Kaplan said.

Vision wants to make the Mesa airport a hub, adding several new routes and will be meeting with Williams Gateway officials next week to find out where the community wants to go, he said.

East Valley/ Scottsdale Tribune: Vision Airlines looks to expand in East Valley

At the top of Vision's wish list are flights from Mesa to Laughlin, Nev., and southern California. Kaplan wouldn't name the targeted southern California airport, but before the service cut-back, the company had its eye on Carlsbad, near San Diego.

Mesa plans to offer up its "We need you" list, a Webbased request for potential passengers' preferences, said Brian Sexton, airport spokesman.

As of April 13, more than 6,200 people have signed on, and the top vote getters are Las Vegas, San Diego, Los Angeles, Denver and Chicago, Sexton said.

Florida-based SkyValue, which has been shuttling passengers between Mesa and Gary, Ind., since December, announced in January plans to expand to the Los Angeles area.

Originally scheduled to take off in February, the California leg of its Mesa-Gary route got delayed as the company negotiated with different airports.

The Mesa-southern California route debut, now aimed for Ontario Airport, is expected to be airborne in summer, said Robert Brinton, executive director of the Mesa Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Brinton doesn't see Sky-Value and Vision battling for passengers.

"All you have to do is look at US Airways or Southwest Airlines and see the number of flights (from Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport to southern California) on a daily basis," Brinton said.

Williams can win over Sky Harbor passengers with cheaper, easier alternatives, he said.

"It all has to do with convenience and cost," Brinton said. "If a lot of those people are coming to or from the East Valley, it's fast check-in, free airport parking, whatever rings the bell for them."

Williams also is on the short list for service from Rockford, Ill., said Bob O'Brien, executive director of Rockford International Airport.

Rockford, which sits nearly equidistant from Chicago and Milwaukee, plans to initiate air service this summer to three new locations, O'Brien said. Mesa is one of seven targeted destinations, he said.

He expects to narrow the list to the three for-sure sites within a month.

Rockford has an economic partnership willing to kick in \$12 million to fund the startup services and \$500,000 to market the destinations in Illinois and Wisconsin, he said.

Several of the carriers O'Brien is talking with would fly to Mesa, he said. But a target destination must be willing to commit funds to market the flights at its end to seal a deal, O'Brien said.

Brinton said that wouldn't be a problem. And he said that, like the two potential southern California routes, two Chicago-area flights - to Gary and Rockford - wouldn't compete for passengers.

Sexton agreed and said that, like San Diego and Los Angeles, Rockford and Chicago were listed separately by "We need you" contributors.


"Rockford alone got 430 votes," he said.

Sexton confirmed Williams Gateway has been talking with Rockford officials but would not discuss details.

Of the top five destinations, only Denver doesn't have a potential deal in some stage of progress, Sexton said.

He didn't rule out pitching Denver to Vision.

"Now the handcuffs are off," he said of Vision's progress in getting its certificate. "This is really important to Williams Gateway, because it turns Vision from a public charter to an airline."

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