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## Williams Gateway gains in recognition, service

**Art Thomason**

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Customers filled most of the tables at the Flight Deck Cafe at Williams Gateway Airport as co-owner Colleen Cara stood in her nearby office. Outside, parking lots that front businesses and office suites along Sossaman Road, the airport's central thoroughfare, were packed with vehicles.

For business owners like Cara, it's the panorama of an airport sprouting the wings of boom that weren't evident just a few years ago. "The airport is getting a lot of recognition," she said. "Last year, more than any, Williams was in the news."

Her perspective is similar to that of airport officials and many other tenants of the former Air Force base. The new year is taking off like 2006 ended - with a flourish, they say.

John Barry, the airport's marketing director, said, "You haven't seen anything yet."

In a 10-day period beginning Dec. 31, the airport fielded 15 big jet charters carrying 2,250 passengers from Oklahoma and Ohio for the nation's most talked about bowl games.

"That's just one way," Barry said. "For arrival and departure, you're looking at 4,500, and that's 450 people a day through our terminal."

It was the busiest period at the airport since Williams was converted in 1993 from an Air Force base to a reliever and jobs and education center.

Barry said the inauguration of passenger service in April by Vision Airlines with flights to and from North Las Vegas Airport and the addition of Phoenix to the airport authority, which owns and operates the facility, were landmark events that triggered other success stories.

"I think it opened a lot of doors for us," he said of Phoenix joining Williams Gateway stakeholders. "It was recognition that it would benefit the entire state if we worked

together to develop commercial air service for the community and the state."

After Vision launched a new era, SkyValue Airlines began the airport's first commercial passenger service to the Chicago area and Western Airlines on Jan. 19 will start charter flights to Bellingham, Wash., four days a week. Allegiant Airlines offers charters to Reno and Laughlin, Nev.

Barry said the carriers are likely to add routes, and/or destinations to existing service and more carriers that use relievers like Williams may begin service at the airport this year.

Development of cargo operations, one of the airport's top priorities, also got a major lift last year with cargo warehouses built by Fred Himovitz, said Casey Denny, Williams Gateway's deputy director.

The airport also was part of an American expansion by one of the four largest aircraft manufacturers in the world. Embraer Aircraft Holding Inc., a Fort Lauderdale subsidiary of Brazilian aircraft-maker Embraer, will develop a maintenance and service center at the airport. It will be capable of servicing all Embraer corporate jets.

"The year 2006 marked the first time that there was understanding among the general public of the potential out here," Denny said.

Jim Brady is a U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer who runs the agency's operations. He said the airport has gone through a banner year.

"I think this airport is wide open for big, commercial business," Brady said.

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