

Allegiant Air to add destinations from Gateway Airport

by **Art Thomason** - Aug. 11, 2008 12:00 AM

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While major airlines are cutting more flights, a no-frills service with 150-seat passenger jets is flying in the opposite direction from the Valley's burgeoning reliever airport in Mesa.

Allegiant Air, which serves nine markets from Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, is adding five destinations beginning in October and is expected to announce another route soon.

The carrier also is augmenting its Gateway fleet with a third MD-80 commercial jet and restoring flights to two Illinois cities.

To accommodate the traffic, the southeast Mesa airport will expand its 24,000-square-foot terminal with portable modules, airport spokesman Brian Sexton said. Scheduled passenger service, which began in October, placed the Charles L. Williams Terminal at capacity.

"The airport is anticipating more traffic than ever this holiday season," Sexton said. "We'll be putting up the modules in the next couple of months. When Allegiant starts doing multiple flights at the same time, we wouldn't be able to handle them without the expansion. They'll be temporary until we can put up a permanent structure."

Allegiant will begin new service to Eugene, Medford and Redmond, Ore.; Great Falls, Mont.; and Springfield, Mo., as it brings back seasonal flights to Peoria and Rockford, Ill., airline spokeswoman Tyra Squyres said.

The routes bring the carrier more of its No. 1 client, the leisure traveler, a demographic that helps keep the carrier profitable, she said.

"They don't have many business travelers, and the vacationers are great for the Valley," Sexton said. "It's a great match for the Allegiant business plan."

Allegiant selected the new routes for their seasonal potential to produce travelers seeking the desert's comfortable climate, Squyres said.

"It's part of our focus on those cold-winter places where Phoenix is very attractive," she said.

In March, Allegiant added seasonal flights to other cold-winter destinations, including Missoula, Mont.

The cities, which aren't served by many major airports, are producing good passenger numbers for Allegiant, Squyres said.

The regional airline finished July with a 95.2 percent load factor, a dynamic "that's pretty unheard of" in an industry cutting flights as it faces mounting losses and record fuel prices, she said.

"Southwest (Airlines) is making money, and we're making money," she said. "Part of it for us is flying to places where the economies are still strong. As a result, we're not seeing some of the things that other carriers are seeing right now."

Allegiant, however, has also dropped service to destinations such as Santa Maria, Calif., that don't generate profits.

Despite the city's location near California's central coast, flights to and from Santa Maria Public Airport had some of the lowest passenger numbers of any Allegiant destinations from Gateway.

Allegiant flies to more than 50 destinations nationally and reported a nearly 60 percent increase in passengers during the fourth quarter. Gateway played a role in that gain, airline executives said.