

E-Town eyeing commercial air service Meant to spur economic development, move may not have much effect here

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The Elizabethtown Airport Board has launched a project to restore commercial airline service to the city's Addington Field municipal airport.

The board has hired a consultant, who's in the midst of compiling statistics and support from regional leaders to pitch to commercial service providers in the future, according to airport manager Roger Lawson.

The venture might not profit the airport much, but it would enhance Elizabethtown's economic development prospects, Lawson said, as community and industry leaders have coveted restored service since a brief stint in the mid-1980s. Lawson declined to speculate on a timeframe or the likelihood of the project's success.

Rob Barnett, airport manager of the Bowling Green-Warren County Regional Airport, said he's aware of Elizabethtown's restoration efforts, although he hasn't discussed it in detail with Lawson. But he doesn't think it would negatively impact Bowling Green's bid to obtain similar service, an ongoing effort for many years.

"Elizabethtown is a considerable distance north of Bowling Green," Barnett said. "I firmly feel if our airport was to secure a regional passenger jet carrier or commercial jet carrier, our community alone would support something of that nature."

Bowling Green's strengths: a vibrant, growing community and a doubling of its airport operations in the last 15 years, he said. However, commuter-passenger providers have overlooked it in the past due to its close proximity to Nashville.

"It's very difficult in today's airline industry to convince companies to expand their services and compete with the larger airlines that are in the market," Barnett said.

Luke Schmidt, Elizabethtown's project consultant, agreed that commercial jet service in Elizabethtown wouldn't negatively impact Bowling Green's bid.

However, Elizabethtown might be better positioned to attract commercial service, he said, because of its closeness to Fort Knox, which is slated to add 8,000 new employees by 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

Elizabethtown's renewed bid is also more viable than 20 years ago, he added, when Delta Airlines and now-defunct Piedmont Airlines cut nearly a dozen combined daily departures because the airport didn't attract enough passengers to justify service.

"It was probably too much service too soon," said Schmidt, an Elizabethtown native now based in Louisville.

Since then, Elizabethtown has grown substantially and the airport is installing an instrument landing system. In addition, the airport has a 6,000-foot runway to handle a variety of aircraft.

Phase one of Schmidt's work – a 276-page market feasibility study – has been completed and defines the airport's service market to include 24 counties, which are closer to Elizabethtown than airports in Nashville, Louisville, Lexington and Evansville, Ind. This area represents a potential market of 350,214 passengers, spanning Glasgow, Leitchfield, Campbellsville and Bowling Green, according to Schmidt's assessment.

More than 90 percent of plant managers surveyed about travel habits indicated they'd use Elizabethtown's commercial service if it was established with competitive airfares, he said.

Phase two includes outreach to the 24-county area, Schmidt said, noting that 15 resolutions of support have already been passed by various councils.

"So far, the response that we've had in each of these counties has been very strong and positive," Schmidt said.

He said Warren County officials haven't been contacted yet, and neither Warren County Judge-Executive Mike Buchanon nor Bowling Green Mayor Elaine Walker could be reached for comment.

"This can be a lengthy process. We expect to begin recruiting an airline sometime in the second quarter. A lot will happen after that," Schmidt said.

Resolutions of support are on the agenda at Morgantown City Council and Butler County Fiscal Court, where Butler Judge-Executive David Fields gives the airport's project his full endorsement.

"The airline industry helps develop anything we can do in this area – we are for it," Fields said. "As of right now, we have to go to Louisville or Nashville to catch a plane."

Meanwhile, commercial jet service in Bowling Green still seeks solid ground.

Barnett said the airport board continually tracks companies that provide commercial jet service to communities the size of Bowling Green.

"Airlines are struggling to make ends meet today. Therefore, you are seeing more and more regional jet service providers surfacing throughout smaller, rural communities," Barnett said.

Plans for a replacement airport and adjacent business campus to a less congested county corridor – nine miles east of the current site on Scottsville Road – are in a holding pattern, he said.

The Federal Aviation Administration is still examining financial aspects of such a move after an FAA-sponsored study was submitted more than six months ago. The current site is almost totally encircled by residential and commercial development, making it difficult to handle expanding FAA safety requirements, Barnett said at the time of the study.