

Airport catches Southwest updraft



HEDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Passenger traffic at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport last month was up 38.4 percent over March 2010, a bump primarily attributed to the arrival of Southwest Airlines.

Passenger traffic at GSP gets big lift from discount carrier



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It didn't take long for Upstate travelers to feel the so-called "Southwest effect" that blew into Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport last month.

Southwest Airlines' partial month of service as it launched operations at GSP propelled passenger traffic up 38 percent last month compared with the same month a year ago, with the low-fare carrier responsible for about 18 percent of the traffic gain.

"There's no question that Southwest was the leader," Dave Edwards, GSP's president and chief executive, told GreenvilleOnline.com. "They added a little over 12,000" passengers flying out of the airport over 19 of the 31 days in March.

Southwest officials said Thursday they have been more than pleased with the region's re-

In March 2010, Northwest Airlines was phasing out operations as it merged with Delta. Vision Airlines began providing service March 25, 2011

PASSENGER TRAFFIC	2010		2011
	Emplanements	Deplanements	
During the month of March	51,140	50,215	140,292
			Total

Source: Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport

SUZIE RIDDLE/Staff

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sponse to the airline's service at GSP.

"What we had originally anticipated and projected for load factors and bookings for GSP, we have certainly exceeded that," airline spokeswoman Laurel Moffat said.

The airline didn't release any specific passenger totals.

GSP also saw a competitive response to Southwest, Edwards said, as other airlines lowered fares and added capacity. Delta added about 1,500 seats a week and saw its traffic increase by 20 percent, he said.

"Everyone contributed" to the increase in passengers departing and arriving at GSP, Edwards said.

For several years before Southwest's arrival on March 13, GSP estimated it was losing more than 60 percent of its potential market to other airports, particularly to Charlotte and Atlanta, as fares were among the highest in the nation.

"We think this is just the start," Edwards said.

Beverly Robertson, a Greenville mother of two, said she and her family took advantage of Southwest's introductory fares to fly to Houston to visit her sister.

"I never thought I could afford to go for just three days with my kids," she said. "It was a fun flight. They seemed so glad to have us fly with them. And the kids loved all the excitement of leaving that first Sunday.

"We'll be using them to fly to other places, too," she said. "This is really great."

Although the other carriers' shares of the GSP market changed with the

arrival of Southwest, officials anticipate that the market will grow rather than passengers simply switching from one airline to another.

"At the end of the day, we want new traffic," said Rosylin Weston, GSP spokeswoman. That new traffic could come from travelers who now drive to their destinations, people who don't usually travel and people who flew from other airports because fares were less expensive.

The March numbers "are proof that what the whole team that worked to attract Southwest to the Upstate believed — the Southwest effect is happening," said Ben Haskew, president of the Greenville Chamber. "We've recaptured a lot of the passenger traffic that had been going to Charlotte and Atlanta."

The last time the airport had a full-service low-cost carrier, Independence Air, GSP reported record passenger traffic. The airline served GSP for about 18 months before declaring bankruptcy in January 2006.

Other tenants also are seeing the result of higher passenger traffic, with extremely strong results in March, Edwards said. For example, Enterprise reported a 50 percent increase in its car rentals for March, compared with the same month a year ago, he said.

Edwards said the airport ran out of parking space in its economy and daily lots on several days. The problem wasn't that the airport had no parking — it had plenty in its two parking garages and the short-term lot — but that is more expensive.

The economy, or long-term parking lot, has 1,097 spaces while the daily lot has 400 spaces, Weston said. The short-term lot has about 200 spaces,

while Garage A has 1,098 and Garage B has 1,500.

"We're already looking at this situation," Edwards said.

Having a full-service low-fare carrier is critical for the region because it levels the playing field among nearby airports, Haskew said. Having access to reasonable fares is important both for existing industries and for the effort to recruit new industry.

Brian Merschon, spokesman for Fluor Corp., said his firm worked closely with the team to bring Southwest to the Upstate.

Although the vast majority of Fluor's travelers flew out of GSP despite the higher rates, Southwest's arrival and its lower rates are beneficial for business in general, he said. Competition tends to provide better fares and better service.

By providing a direct flight to Houston — in head-to-head competition with Continental Express — Southwest improves the travel situation to Fluor's offices there. Also, Southwest has a direct link between Houston and Dallas, which is served directly from GSP by American Eagle.

Joe Erwin, president of the Erwin-Penland advertising agency, said scores of local businesses and companies, including his agency, are committed to supporting Southwest's presence here.

That doesn't mean they will exclude other airlines, he said.

In making travel plans recently, he and his wife worked on Southwest's website "for quite a while because we really wanted to make it on Southwest Airlines," Erwin said.

"We just couldn't work out the logistics," he said. "So we booked another carrier."



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Southwest's arrival led to other airlines lowering their fares out of Greenville-Spartanburg, further boosting traffic, according to Dave Edwards, GSP president.