CHANGING AIR TRAVEL HERE

COMMUNITY EFFORT LANDED SOUTHWEST



KEN OSBURN / Staff

Travelers crowd the Southwest airlines ticket counter area at Greenville Spartanburg International Airport.

By David Dykes
STAFF WRITER
ddykes@greenvilleonline.com

The maverick spirit that vaulted Southwest Airlines to success led company officials to pursue the road less-traveled.

And last month, that road passed through the Upstate.

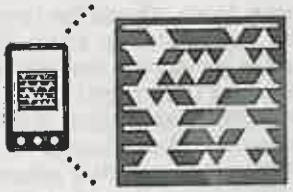
Operating from two gates in Greenville-Spartanburg International's main terminal. Dallas-based Southwest began service with seven daily departures — two to Baltimore/Washington and Chicago Midway plus Nashville, Houston and Orlando.

"Our future is looking very bright, and a big reason for that is our new service in Greenville-Spartanburg and Charleston," said Gary Kelly, Southwest's chief

See **AIRLINE** on page 10A

SEE THE VIDEO

Watch a video used in part by Greenville to bring Southwest to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport at GreenvilleOnline.com.



Get the free mobile app at http://gettag.mobi

AIRLINE

FROM PAGE 1A

executive, who also is its chairman and president.

It was a partnership that was years in the making, one that hit bumpy stretches and sometimes was put on hold.

But the goal of luring the discount airline to GSP, where high fares and smaller carriers have been the norm, galvanized a determined Upstate.

Corporations wrote scores of letters to Southwest pledging their support. Community leaders met many times to plot local strategy, and supporters waged a marketing blitz to tout the region.



Kelly

They produced a "key proposal" book covering several hundred pages and played a promotional video at one of the last key meetings with Southwest executives that drew tears from at least one attendee.

That level of interest and community support "really put us over the edge" and overcame the airline's concerns about the economic risks here, Kelly said. Greenville is a smaller market for Southwest, but one that he believes is overpriced and underserved.

In an interview with GreenvilleOnline.com, Kelly said a "really tough recession" forced Southwest to suspend expansion at the time the airline was evaluating service to South Carolina.

Commission chairwoman, said local officials had recruited Southwest "for at least 13 years, maybe more."



Shaw

In a November newspaper column, Shaw and Sam Konduros, now chairman of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, credited a collaborative effort of civic and business leaders worked for bringing the airline here.

"Egos were checked at the door; no one cared about who received credit, and a contagious passion to make this happen 'for the good of the Upstate' infused every person involved," the two wrote.



Erwin

Joe Erwin, president of the Erwin-Penland advertising agency in Greenville, said more than 200 companies in the Upstate pledged a large share of their travel business to Southwest.

"Everyone understood that the Upstate was going to win this thing as a unified body, or we weren't going to win," said Erwin, who helped lead the marketing arm of the campaign.

He said when disagreements arose about what to present to Southwest officials, "We would get the group small and say, 'let's make sure we're all in alignment here.'"

"It is always a risk to buy new airplanes and add new service," he said. "We just didn't have the profits that were sufficient to justify investing in more aircraft that would then allow you to open new markets.

"At the end of the day, we have to be able to be confident that we'll be profitable to be able to sustain the service," he said. "But you can't be profitable if you don't have the commitment from the community."

Kelly said GSP's rates and charges in the first two years, plus the airport's commitment to a proposed $100 million renovation and expansion of the passenger terminal, also were key factors in the decision.

"They're very anxious to grow the airport," Kelly said of GSP officials. "If the need arises there, I know we'll have a good partner in the airport."

Minor Shaw, Airport

Local officials were determined their effort would represent "the best thinking, the best commitment, of all the businesses and organizations in the Upstate," Erwin said.

He said more than 80 employees at his firm worked on the Southwest project off and on over an 18-month period.

Kelly said that he never talked personally to the late Roger Milliken, the textile giant who headed the airport commission for decades. But other Southwest officials did, Kelly said.

Last month, Southwest also began service from Charleston with seven daily departures.

Kelly said airlines will remain under pressure from rising fuel costs.

"We'll have a record fuel bill here in 2011," he said. "But I at least feel like we'll have a solid profit outlook so that we can serve you well. We want to be here for the long term. When we launch service to new cities, we do it with the intention of staying."