Edward moves to improve GSP

Search for low-fare carrier, update to terminal in the works

By Jenny Munro
BUSINESS WRITER
jmunro@greenvillenews.com

Dave Edwards, executive director of Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport, likes to plan and then to quickly take action on those plans.

He's been at GSP for about four months – moving 60 miles down the road from Asheville – and likes a lot of what he sees at the Upstate's regional airport. Problems exist: high fares and losing well over half GSP's potential market.

An effort to attract a low-fare carrier was in place when he came to GSP and activity has ramped up recently. Southwest Airlines returned to the Upstate in August, checking out the market, and Edwards said he had been to Dallas since then to meet with airline officials.

But GSP and its supporters are talking to all low-fare carriers, including Jet Blue, AirTran and Frontier, he said.

"We're very optimistic," he said, adding optimism is his nature. "The great thing is we're still talking."



"The more non-stops we can get, the more it will help."
Dave Edwards

Business leaders and airport officials agree that a low-fare carrier is vital to the future of GSP, which is losing about 66 percent of its potential market to nearby airports, primarily Charlotte and Atlanta.

GSP was named as the fifth most expensive airport in the nation in the second quarter of this year. Also, two of the airlines that provide service for Delta passengers out of GSP – Comair and Atlantic Southeast Airlines – were at the bottom of the list for timely arrivals in July, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

Michelin North America would save money and its employees would find traveling easier if a low-fare carrier served GSP and more direct destinations were available, Michael Fanning, vice president of corporate affairs, said recently. Lower fares would be a competitive advantage for Michelin and

See GSP on page 3E

GSP

FROM PAGE 1E

"that's another way to drive down costs."

Edwards said he's also looking to the airlines that now provide service to the airport, trying to strengthen the airport's relationship with its incumbent airlines, asking how GSP can help the airlines and how the airlines can aid the airport. He's already begun visiting officials at the various airlines' headquarters.

One goal is to increase the number of non-stop destinations, which dropped to 15 when Memphis flights were lost because of the merger of Delta Airlines and Northwest. Edwards said he'd like to see non-stop service to Boston, Miami, Orlando, Denver and Hartford, Conn.

Although Allegiant Air, a low-fare leisure airline, provides Orlando area service from GSP through the small Orlando-Sanford Airport, he said he believes support is sufficient for service into Orlando International Airport.

"Service is actually pretty good," he said, adding that GSP has direct service to about 15 of the top 20 destinations for Upstate travelers. "The more nonstops we can get, the more it will help."

Many business people have said they're concerned about the lack of access to the West Coast from GSP. Flights to Denver could be a help in that regard.

Some of his activities, however, require creating plans first and then acting on them.

Among GSP's advantages are its facilities and its 3,500 acres of property, he said.

Reynolds, Smith & Hills, an airport consultant, has begun a study of GSP from the parking lots to the airside of the terminal. Completion of the study, costing about $500,000, is slated for May. The first stage of renovation could begin immediately after that, he said, while the design for the rest of the renovation could be completed in six to 12 months.

"I'm pretty methodical, but I like to move once a plan is completed," Edwards said.

This study is an effort to move the terminal, a 50-year-old building, into the 21st century, he said, while improving the areas around the terminal.

Besides that, he wants to look at the best use of the available property and find ways to diversify the airport's revenues. About 500 acres are used for buildings and the airfield. Land is set aside for a parallel runway to the existing one.

"We have room for growth," he said. "The Commission and staff have done a wonderful job of amassing property that will serve the airport far into the future."

Some of the raw space can be developed while other portions need to be maintained as natural areas, he said. That commitment to natural areas could be what differentiates GSP from other airports.

To work in that direction, Edwards said he expects to begin a comprehensive land use plan after the first of the year.

The airport must "take a hard look at development," he said. "Some of the property could be used for other aviation-related services" or for general business operations.

Figuring out how to develop the land without harming future growth of the airport is a necessity if the airport is to diversify its revenues, he said.

The first step, however, is planning what needs to be done to upgrade the terminal.

"The core part of the building was done well," he said. Since the terminal was built, loading bridges, parking garages and concourse expansions have been completed.

Among the areas to be studied will be parking – a major revenue component for GSP. The question being considered is whether the airport needs to reduce parking rates in the economy lots, perhaps raising them in other areas to make any changes revenue-neutral.

"We're very competitive with our peer group of airports," Edwards said. "The challenge is that our biggest competitor is Charlotte and they charge about $4 a day."

Another issue being considered is the arrival-departure lanes in front of the terminal. Edwards thinks there may be a need for more covered areas, perhaps with canopies leading to the garages and economy parking. In addition, the ticketing and baggage claim areas will be studied. Perhaps an in-line device that reduces the amount of hand checking for explosive devices in checked baggage could be installed.

But he said the two primary focus areas are the security checkpoints and concession areas. Edwards is interested in the possibility of creating a single security checkpoint and connecting the two concourses. Combining the existing checkpoints would be more efficient and would give more flexibility to the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, allowing portions of the checkpoint to be closed when not needed.

"We think it would be easier for the passenger," he said, and is not expected to lengthen the time it takes to pass through security.

By joining the concourses, the airport could centralize retail concession areas behind the security checkpoint, giving more choices to passengers once they check in for their flight.

Edwards also is considering changing the looks of the terminal.

"What can we do," he asked, "to make a clean austere building a little softer, more welcoming?" The renovation could include some type of ceiling treatment to make the ceiling seem less cavernous, noise control, lighting and the front façade of the building.

The study also will look at environmental issues, studying new systems to minimize the use of electricity, gas and water. Solar energy could be used to heat hot water and generate electricity. Sustainable materials could be used in any renovation or construction. The LEEDS standards – which are used to define an environmentally friendly building – would be a guideline for the building.

For example, the construction of the new terminal to be used by Stevens Aviation is trying to use construction techniques that could lead toward LEEDS certification.

Also, Larry Holcombe, airport manager, said the two new boarding ramps will provide heating or air conditioning to a parked plane. That means, he said, that a generator will not be needed on the tarmac to provide the ventilation. When other ramps are refurbished, this feature also will be added.

"Doing away with the generator will improve air quality at the airport," he said.

Roger Milliken, chairman of the GSP Airport Commission, said he believes the airport could be retrofitted to become an environmentally sound building. He cited the work being done with the Empire State Building in New York City, which is being retrofitted as a LEEDS facility.

This study is very important," Edwards said. "I'm trying to provide a base line."