VOICES

THE GREENVILLE NEWS EDITORIAL

GSP airport keeps getting better

Capitalizing on local efforts to attract airlines, a project to improve and modernize its terminal, and the impact of business changes in the broader commercial aviation industry, Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport is continuing to move forward.

At an event last week to celebrate the opening of the first phase of a major terminal renovation, the airport's president told reporters that there is a very good chance that GSP — and that means all of us in the Upstate — could benefit from the recent merger of American Airlines and US Airways into the world's largest commercial airline.

GSP president Dave Edwards recently told *The News* that as the new airline reevaluates its hub structure, it could create opportunities for GSP to capture some new nonstop flights to other cities. The airport has identified several markets that need nonstop service from GSP. Those include Miami, Boston, Denver, Las Vegas and Phoenix. Airport officials also want to expand nonstop service to New York.

If GSP could capture some of that much-needed service if and when the new airline adjusts how it uses its Charlotte Hub, it would be another in a string of successes for the airport. The hope of expanding nonstop service follows the 2011 arrival of Southwest Airlines to the Upstate that really was a watershed event for GSP and the region. That significant expansion of service into and out of GSP has had a resoundingly positive impact on all the carriers that serve the airport as well as on businesses throughout the Upstate.

Southwest came around the time the airport was planning the major terminal expansion. At last week's event, airport officials unveiled the new rental car center that is the first project in Phase I of the Wingspan terminal expansion project. The car rental companies now are on the first and second levels of parking garage A, according to a report in *The News*. This small sliver of Wingspan will contribute to improved efficiency at the airport.

The car rental center cost $3.3 million, just a fraction of the total $115 million price tag for Wingspan. Other features of the renovation include more food, beverage and retail outlets in the terminal, a third baggage carousel, a covered walkway that connects the terminal to the parking garage, and a renovation that will give the terminal a glass front that will allow in more natural light and help reduce energy costs.

The total price tag on Wingspan is about $115 million, and 80 percent is being funded with existing airport funds and the other 20 percent coming from a Federal Aviation Administration improvement program and the Transportation Security Administration. This project is a excellent example of wise financial stewardship by the airport commission and its staff.

Expanding nonstop options to major cities and increasing the frequency of flights to New York along with creating a more pleasing terminal experience all could help further reduce the passenger "leakage" that GSP had been experiencing up until Southwest arrived. It also could help further drive down fares as competition between the carriers at the airport could increase even more.

Already that leakage has declined significantly. Last fall, airport officials reported that traffic had increased by 43 percent since Southwest arrived. Previously, as much as two-thirds of potential GSP traffic had been choosing other options such as airports in Charlotte and Atlanta that could offer lower fares and more direct flight options.

All of these developments attest to an airport administration that never rests. The leadership at GSP understands the desires of this community, and specifically the needs of our business community, and is continually striving to meet those needs in an increasingly competitive environment. They deserve significant credit for the progress GSP has made in recent years.

As the Wingspan project moves forward, Edwards' and the current commission's fingerprint on GSP will be increasingly evident. If service at the airport continues to expand and fares continue to decrease, that fingerprint will expand to this entire community.

We have said it before: Affordable, accessible commercial air service is essential to economic development. The more flights into and out of GSP that increase the convenience and affordability of the airport, the greater impact the facility can have on attracting new businesses — and new employees — to the Upstate.

There's no guarantee that the airline merger will mean better service to GSP. But Edwards is not shy about taking the Upstate's case to the new carrier, and others at GSP, to see if we can capitalize on major changes in the airline industry. That sort of proactive approach is much appreciated and it needs to continue.