Trying to lure a low-cost carrier



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Greenville-area leaders are trying to recruit Southwest Airlines to the Upstate.

Southwest, GSP continue discussions

Airport officials trying to increase fare competition

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Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport is continuing to talk with Southwest Airlines and other low-fare carriers to try to add additional service and competition to the regional airport.

Dave Edwards, GSP executive director, said that a Southwest team was in the Greenville area in August and that he has met with airline officials in Dallas since then.

Greenville-area business and community leaders are aggressively recruiting Southwest Airlines in hopes the Dallas-based carrier will bring more competition and lower local airfares, which are among the highest in the nation.

Competitive pricing of air fares is a big boost for any community, said Ed Faberman, executive director of the Air Carrier Association of America, an organization seeking to improve fare affordability for all passengers.

Southwest is continuing its conversations with GSP but is not ready to make any announcement, said Ashley Rogers, airline public relations coordinator.

"We're always looking at new markets," she said. "We continue to meet with airports across the country."

This year, Southwest is adding four airports to its service grid, she said. The airline began service in Minneapolis-St. Paul in March, in New York's LaGuardia in June and Boston in August. Service will begin to Milwaukee, Wis., in November.

When looking at new markets, the airline considers the competitive environment at the airport, the growth potential, the costs of serving the airport and the demand for service, Rogers said.

"Southwest must be able to survive and thrive," she said.

Faberman said low-fare carriers look at three major factors when selecting destination cities: passenger base, most desirable destinations and support, either federal or local, while the airline is building its base.

"We're very optimistic," Edwards said of the "meaningful discussions" that are under way.

"The great thing is we're still talking," he said.

But GSP is not pinning its hopes solely on Southwest.

"We're working hard. We're talking to all the low-fare carriers," including Jet Blue, AirTran and Frontier, Edwards said. "Our ability to secure a low-cost carrier will help this airport and the community as will our ability to work better with the incumbent carriers."