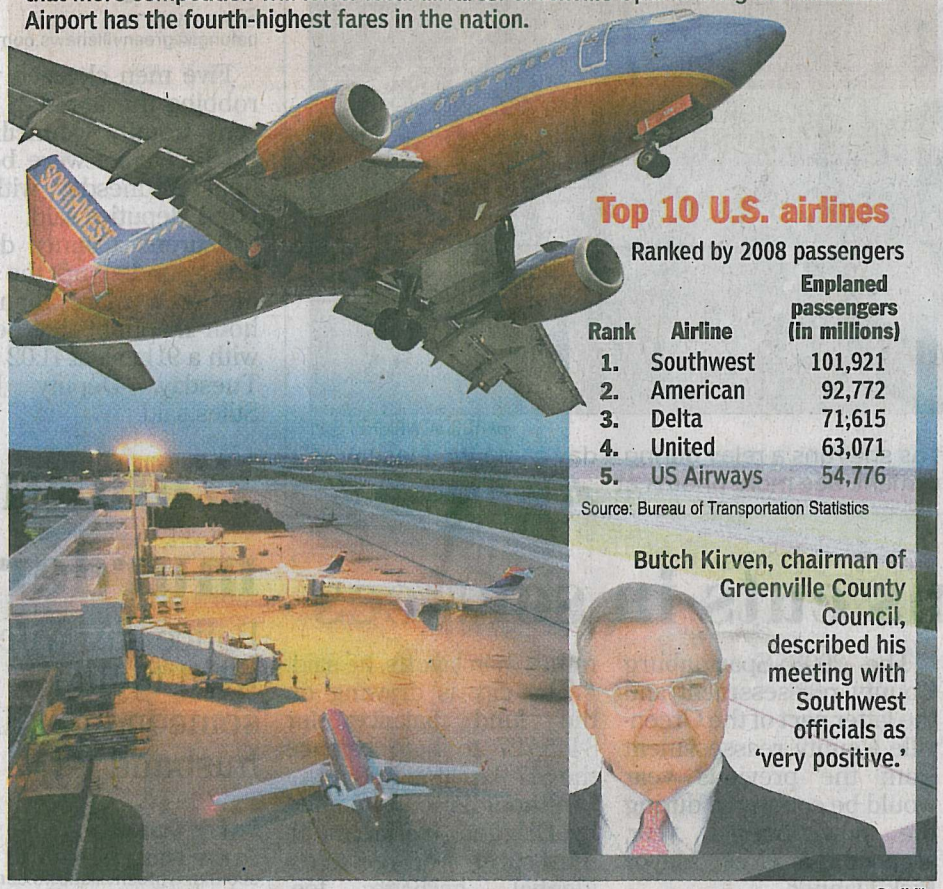
Top airline looks at market here

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

■ Business and community leaders are heavily recruiting Southwest Airlines in hopes that more competition will lower local airfares. Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport has the fourth-highest fares in the nation.



Top 10 U.S. airlines

Ranked by 2008 passengers

Rank	Airline	Enplaned passengers (in millions)
1.	Southwest	101,921
2.	American	92,772
3.	Delta	71;615
4.	United	63,071
5.	US Airways	54,776

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics

Butch Kirven, chairman of Greenville County Council, described his meeting with Southwest officials as 'very positive.'

Staff file

Southwest operates 3,300 flights a day in the United States, flying to 65 cities in 33 states.

Southwest could bring lower fares, bigger jets for area travelers

By Ben Szobody, David Dykes and Jenny Munro
STAFF WRITERS

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 the fourth highest in the nation.

For passengers, Southwest's presence in the Upstate could impact the cost of air travel.

It also would mean larger jet service — and possibly more direct flights — at an airport where nine of every 10 flights are on smaller commuter aircraft.

Southwest carried almost 102 million passengers last year, more than any other domestic carrier, all on Boeing 737 jets.

The long struggle to diversify the carriers at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport is far from over, but local officials said they were heartened — and guardedly optimistic — about several days of meetings

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this week with Southwest officials. GSP service would be the airline's first in South Carolina.

Southwest, the biggest U.S. discount carrier, confirmed Wednesday its schedule and planning officials were in Greenville, but a spokeswoman cautioned airline representatives have attended similar recruitment meetings "in a lot of other cities" this year.

"Southwest Airlines is always exploring and looking at new markets to serve," said Ashley Rogers, the airline spokeswoman.

She said there are "no firm plans" to operate at GSP.

The airline's expansion schedule this year, she said, includes Minneapolis, New York's LaGuardia Airport, Boston and Milwaukee.

County Council Chairman Butch Kirven said he attended a meeting Monday night with Southwest officials, whom he described as "noncommittal" but "very receptive" and "very positive."

Kirven said he thinks the chances are "very good" for attracting Southwest, calling Greenville a unique market at a unique time for the airline.

Airline officials conducted significant internal market research before arriving in Greenville, Kirven said, adding his impression of company data was that the airline could run a reasonable number of full flights.

The airline's fleet consists of 737-300, 737-500 and 737-700 jetliners that seat between 122 and 137 passengers, according to Southwest's Web site.

Kirven said the company's internal software predicted the number of seats it could sell, projected routes and times of day and included business and demographic information. The depth of the research, he said, was a "good sign."

He said the airline also was aware of Michelin's worldwide sales force, the significant amount of Greenville training done by Hubbell Lighting and the business travel generated by BMW.

Southwest also could help boost Greenville's budding tourism industry because the airline is a favorite among leisure travelers who enjoy its low fares and flexibility in changing travel schedules, Kirven said.

His role in the Monday meeting was to demonstrate Greenville's openness in working with the airline, Kirven said. He said no incentives were discussed.

Kirven said another meeting was scheduled Wednesday at BMW's Zentrum, where officials from other Upstate counties planned to emphasize the regional interest in Southwest.

He said there's "no question" the airline would pay economic dividends. Inquiries about air travel are among the first questions prospective employers ask of local business recruiters, Kirven said.

"We're at a disadvantage because, typically, schedules are more limited at GSP and the fares are a lot higher there because there's not as much competition," Kirven said. "Southwest would change that whole dynamic."

Mayor Knox White couldn't be reached for comment.

Ben Haskew, president and chief executive of the Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce, said the Southwest meetings involved "business development" and he wouldn't discuss any details.

Greenville-Spartanburg International, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, had in the fourth quarter of 2008 the fourth-highest average airfare in the nation — behind only Cincinnati, Grand Rapids, Mich., and Knoxville — among the country's top 100 airports.

The average fare from GSP was $441, according to figures compiled by the DOT's Bureau of Transportation Statistics. That was down from $542 in the third quarter, when GSP had the nation's third-highest average airfare behind Cincinnati and Knoxville.

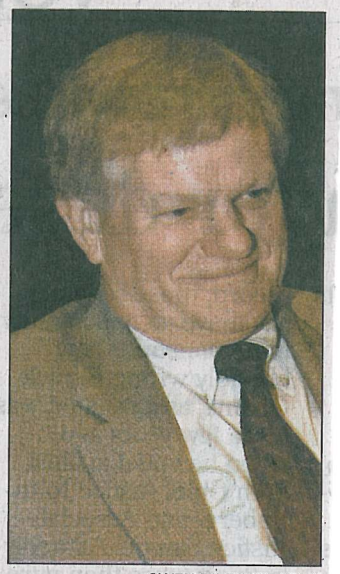
The average fourth-quarter fare at all airports was $347.

Although Southwest still has a decision to make, "it is a big deal having them here" and being able to tell Greenville's story, said Stewart Spinks, chairman of Spinx Oil, who said he was involved in showing Greenville to the visiting Southwest executives.

"I think a low-fare carrier is a part of the equation. We've got pent-up demand here," he said.

Spinks said one of his colleagues flies often but seldom checks GSP flights because of the cost.

In addition to having a low-fare carrier, GSP needs one that is likely to remain in business, he said, adding "the stability of an airline like Southwest is important."



OWEN RILEY JR. / Staff

Stewart Spinks

Earlier this month, Southwest marked the 10th year of operations at North Carolina's Raleigh-Durham International Airport, where the airline offers 33 daily nonstop flights to 10 cities and last year served nearly 2 million passengers.

"They're a terrific airline to have and have done a great deal in terms of providing variety and also affordable rates and great service," said Harvey Schmitt, president and CEO of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce. Schmitt is a former president and chief executive of the Greater Greenville chamber.

Rosylin Weston, spokeswoman for GSP, said the local airport is losing more than half of its potential customer base because of high fares.

She said about 55 percent of that base is lost primarily to Atlanta and Charlotte.

"The No. 1 reason that customers give is the cost of fares," she said.