VP says Southwest serious about GSP

Senate OKs incentives for low-cost carriers as executive lauds Upstate

By Rudolph Bell and Tim Smith
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A Southwest Airlines executive said Thursday his company is giving "very serious consideration" to bringing its coveted discount service to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport as the Senate gave key approval to a bill to create an incentives program aimed at luring discount carriers like Southwest to the state.

The air incentives bill had been blocked by Midlands senators, but late Thursday, the Senate gave unanimous approval to the air incentives bill.

The legislation must still receive final approval.

Sen. Larry Grooms, a Berkeley County Republican and chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, told *The Greenville News* that if the bill passes that a carrier like Southwest would likely locate in Greenville and Charleston within a year.

Dave Ridley, Southwest's senior vice president for marketing and revenue management, said earlier in the day that the airline is very careful about entering new markets and has no plans to do so this year.

Ridley was in Greenville to speak at the annual Food for Thought conference.

The incentives bill would make up to $15 million available to South Carolina airports for enhancing air service and recruiting discount airlines.

Senators from the Midlands have been using Senate rules to block the legislation out of concern the Columbia airport would lose business if Southwest launched service in Greenville/Spartanburg and/or Charleston.

Late Thursday night, Rep. Dan Cooper, a Piedmont Republican who chairs the Ways and Means Committee, said lawmakers from both chambers were negotiating an amendment that could resolve the issue by providing additional funding for airports, including Columbia's, to recruit discount airlines.

"Assuming this deal sticks together, I think the chances are excellent" for passage, Cooper said.

Ridley, the Southwest executive, told *The Greenville News* that the airline's 69-city service network has a gap over the Carolinas and Georgia and that GSP, the Upstate's primary airport, has characteristics his company looks for in considering expansion.

"If you look at our history, Southwest consistently has tried to go to airports that are underserved and overpriced," Ridley said. "What does that say about the attractiveness of Greenville? It's underserved and overpriced."

Ridley said he is particularly sensitive to the service gap because one of his daughters lives in Greenville, another in Charlotte and his son attends Clemson University.

"Other than probably picking dead middle of South Dakota, I don't think you could find any place on the United States map that you have to drive four and a half hours to a Southwest destination, except for right here, and guess where all my kids live?" Ridley said.

Still, he said launching service at GSP would be a risk. The arrival of Southwest would draw more fliers, "but it's still got to be enough to fill up 137 seats every day," Ridley said, referring to the number of seats on the larger Boeing 737 jets his company uses.

"Now you know what you've got here right now is 50-seat airplanes. There's a reason why you have 50-seat airplanes. It's because there's not enough demand to fill up 137 seats."

Lawmakers and business leaders from Greenville say Southwest's arrival at GSP would drive down the cost of airfare at what is now one of the nation's most-expensive airports and be a boon for economic development by making the Upstate more attractive to convention planners and corporate headquarters.

Ridley said a delegation from the Upstate traveled to Dallas last summer to encourage Southwest to launch service at GSP, and that's when he met Greenville advertising executive Joe Erwin, founder of the Food for Thought conference.

Later, Ridley said, Upstate officials asked if incentives would make GSP more attractive and Southwest said they would.

Ridley likened Southwest's consideration of Greenville to its decision-making for new service it's scheduled to launch next month in Panama City, Fla.

Southwest initially rejected a pitch to begin service in the Florida Panhandle but agreed to it after The St. Joe Co., a real estate development company, put up millions of dollars as a guarantee against possible losses by the airline in the early years of service.

Ridley said the airline has never demanded incentives.

"We do not try to hold communities hostage," he said. "That's not the way to be a good partner."

Ridley said the Upstate and its thriving economy are attractive to Southwest.

"This looks like a place we ought to be, but do we want to take that risk?"



KEN OSBURN / / Staff

Southwest executive Dave Ridley says Greenville 'looks like a place we ought to be.'