

American Airlines returns to Columbus Airport

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By TONY ADAMS

Betting it can grab a profitable share of the Columbus travel market, American Airlines flew back into the city Thursday after an absence of nearly 15 years.

But that bet is hedged by about \$650,000 in incentives from the Columbus Airport Commission, which is waiving typical landing fees, rent, security fees and other charges for the first year of service here.

“After that they’ve got to pay like everybody else does,” said Columbus airport director Mark Oropeza. “The airline market has changed so drastically in the last 10 or 15 years. Now it’s all about incentives. What are you going to do for us to get us into the market?”

For Columbus, landing American is about giving local residents an option other than Delta Air Lines through Atlanta, officials said. The new service by American Eagle, a feeder airline, will offer a direct shot west to American’s largest hub in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. There are two daily flights each way.

“Once you get to Dallas, there’s over 250 destinations to 40 countries (available) in conjunction with our One World partners — British Airways, Japan Airlines, Qantas and nine other airlines,” said Jerry Krus, regional sales manager for American Airlines.

American’s first flight into Columbus Thursday was marked by more than 100 community and business leaders with cake and refreshments inside the terminal, followed by welcome sprays of water over the airplane after its arrival.

More than half of the 44 seats on the Embraer ERJ-140 regional jet were filled, the airline said. The same flight today is completely booked, it said.

The trick will be making sure passengers fill most of those seats routinely, said Oropeza, who often compares the long process of negotiating with an airline to courting a mid-sized business.

“There’s a factory coming to Columbus,” he remarked to those at the terminal Thursday. “But it’s a use-it-or-lose-it factory.”

American left the Columbus market in October 1995 after a six-year stint, saying passenger counts were not strong enough to support business.

That was followed by Northwest Airlines and US Airways pulling out in 2001 and 2003, respectively, as air traffic dwindled.

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More and more people either drove to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport or took a shuttle service to fly out of there so they could use a variety of airlines.

Since peaking at about 250,000 passengers flying into and out of Columbus Airport in 1991, passenger counts dropped below 200,000 in 1998 and fell under the 100,000 in 2005.

But traffic has begun to pick up since then, reaching 100,000 arrivals and departures in 2009 and setting up Thursday's return to a city that is rebounding quickly from the U.S. economic recession. That recovery is because of a mix of companies beginning to hire workers and the expansion of Fort Benning generated by the Base Realignment and Closure process.

Jacki Lowe, chairwoman of the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, said American's reappearance here could in itself have an impact on business development in the area.

"Transportation is a big driver in any economic development project or endeavor," said Lowe, also a regional vice president for Georgia Power. "To have multiple airlines flying into our community just elevates our ability to meet the needs of any business that might be looking to locate here."

One of the biggest lures for American Airlines, however, has to be the U.S. military. Col. Tom Macdonald, garrison commander at Fort Benning, pointed out that 10,000 airline tickets were issued last year at the post for official travel through Columbus Airport. Another 22,000 tickets were through the airport in Atlanta. Those numbers don't include leisure travel.

Though he could not make any projections, Macdonald said he expects there could be some shift in that business from Atlanta to Columbus simply because of the convenience and choice military travelers will now have heading west.

"I think in a lot of cases it's going to be a better option for them to go out of Dallas," he said. "With the narrow window of flights coming out of Columbus (before), a lot of times it was more advantageous to take Groome or some other ground transportation to Atlanta so that you're not in an airport for an extraordinary amount of time for a layover. I think this gives you more options."

Only time will tell whether or not American will add more flights to Columbus. But the airline is definitely in an expansion mode at the moment, with Krus saying it will have opened stations in 53 new markets by the end of August.

And Sherri Goodrum, who chairs the Columbus Airport Commission, said there are hopes of landing more airlines. The commission has been talking with discount carriers, including Allegiant Air.

But don't expect Southwest Airlines, the popular discount carrier based in Arizona, to drop its landing gear onto the Columbus tarmac anytime soon. The exorbitant incentives required is the main reason.

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“Panama City’s getting Southwest, but people don’t realize it took a \$26 million guarantee,” Goodrum said. “We were able to get American without going and getting outside guarantees (from the city). We’ve given them airport incentives, but it would be very hard for this community to raise the money to support Southwest.”