

American Airlines to begin two daily flights between Columbus, Dallas

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After an absence of nearly 15 years, American Airlines is poised to spread its wings and fly back into the Columbus Airport with its American Eagle regional jet service. Starting July 15, Fort Worth, Texas-based American will begin two daily flights between its Dallas-Fort Worth hub and Columbus, the company said Tuesday.

American Eagle, a regional feeder for the airline, will service the Columbus market with two 44-seat Embraer ERJ-140 jets.

“We look at cities and run the numbers ... we have these (computer) models that we use,” said Dale Morris, American’s managing director of government affairs. “One of the great things is that there are some positive signs from Columbus, Ga. When you see those signs and there’s that potential, you want to take advantage of it and partner with the community.”

One of the biggest factors is the expansion at Fort Benning because of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure process. The post is picking up the U.S. Army Armor School and other missions related to training and sending U.S. troops into combat.

“One thing American told us when we met with them last fall was they are trying to expand to the smaller communities that have a military presence,” said Sherry Goodrum, chair of the Columbus Airport Commission. “We know they’ve done that at Manhattan, Kan., with Fort Riley. So when we started to initiate talks with them, we knew the BRAC expansion would be huge.”

It’s all about the numbers, with Fort Benning looking to add about 28,000 soldiers, civilian employees, defense contractors and family members by September 2011 as part of its buildup. On the travel front, the post typically issues about 33,000 airline tickets a year for soldiers and civilian workers heading to and from the installation, said Brandon Cockrell, chief of the post’s Plans, Analysis & Integration Office.

“About 10,000 of those fly through Columbus and the rest go to Atlanta. It’s just an unserved demand,” Cockrell said, who expects the flights to and through Dallas will be popular. “A lot of soldiers that are leaving here are headed that way. Half of our folks typically go out west and a lot go to the Northeast.”

Another key will be capturing a high percentage of the corporate travel market. Goodrum said the airport, using data from local companies, has tracked the top 25 airport destinations to and from the city.

“We know where they’re going, whether it be Dallas, Seattle, Los Angeles,” she said. “The other thing is by going to Dallas, you’re going to be able to get to Central America, Japan. So it opens up an international market as well.”

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Columbus is already served by Delta Air Lines, which schedules four to five flights a day between the city and Atlanta, its main hub. Delta uses Atlantic Southeast Airlines for its service.

Roughly 100,000 people fly into and out of Columbus each year. Goodrum estimates that number could rise to at least 150,000 with American Airline's presence.

True asset

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. More and more people either drove to Atlanta 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 mark in 2005.

But traffic has begun to pick up since then, setting up Tuesday's pivotal announcement by American that it can make a go of it locally.

But this is only a start, said Mike Gaymon, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce. He said it's been a "long, long journey" trying to get Columbus-area residents to understand that the airport is a true asset. Flying out of the city saves people time and hassles with parking and security, he said.

"We need to fill these planes," he said, "so that folks will say, hey, we need to add another service or another flight, whether it's Delta or American or whoever. If you don't fill the planes it's hard to get more."

It was a tough job just getting American Airlines to commit here, said Mark Oropeza, director of Columbus Airport. It took persistence with steady contact and a stream of information about the local market's potential. He compared it to going after a mid-size industry in terms of the effort.

"You have to just work 'em and work 'em and work 'em," he said. "You also have to do a lot of the homework for them. For example, the amount of people that drive to Atlanta ... you basically do some studies and do the math and show them, there's where your market is, guys."

Oropeza estimates 90 percent of the potential travel market for Columbus Airport is going elsewhere. And he thinks that with Fort Benning's constant mission — training troops — and with the growth in the area, passenger counts could someday approach 500,000.

"I'm hoping the market will respond like I think it will," he said. "If it does, this is just the start. After that it could go to three or four round trips to Dallas or another one of their hubs, perhaps to Chicago or to Miami."