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Air travel near record in '11

Passenger numbers at the Walla Walla Regional Airport were at their second-highest level last year.

WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

WALLA WALLA -- It was a high-flying year for air travel in 2011.

Last year's passenger numbers soared to their second highest level in history, according to the latest figures from the Walla Walla Regional Airport. Even better, officials said, is that this was accomplished with one less daily flight than Walla Walla had during its record air passenger year in 2009.

In 2011, 32,127 passengers flew from Walla Walla to Seattle. That figure was up from 29,050 the year before. The highest year on record was 33,430 in 2009.

Slightly fewer people than that flew into Walla Walla from Seattle. Last year 32,002 people stepped off the plane into the community. That figure buried the previous year's 28,592, but was down from 2009's 33,898.

Airport and travel officials say the solid numbers from the two-flight schedule may be bolstered by public awareness campaigns designed to educate local residents about the benefits of flying locally and keep the idea at the forefront of their travel plans. Among those benefits: free parking (and more on the way with an expansion of the parking lot in the works for this year), cost and time savings from not commuting to another airport, supporting the local economy and fringe benefits, including free Wi-Fi and coffee.

A new partnership between the Walla Walla Valley Wine Alliance and Alaska Airlines unveiled at the end of November provides a more specific incentive for wine tourists, in particular.

The "Taste and Tote" initiative waives tasting fees at more than 70 Walla Walla Valley wineries for Alaska Airlines' passengers traveling to Walla Walla. The program also waives the \$20 baggage handling fee on the first case of wine checked on flights headed out of Walla Walla. The combination has historically been a one-two punch for wine tourists and is believed to have deterred visitors in the past from either purchasing more wine while they were here or from choosing air travel as their mode of transportation.

Port of Walla Walla Commissioner Paul Schneidmiller, who owns World Wide Travel Service, said the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce has also been diligent in working with the airline and keeping the message about the importance of flying locally in front of the public.

Walla Walla Regional Airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund said a mild December helped bolster the numbers. The airport had few flight cancellations in December, when the more typical fog-filled month is riddled with them.

She said she believes the growth over 2010 is also due to "a whole host" of efforts to build air travel.

"I think marketing, the partnership that we have here locally with the wine alliance, tourism, the Port, emphasizing trying to fly Walla Walla first, our communication with Alaska," she listed. "And the community has really stepped forward."

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