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Air travel soars up

For the third straight year, boardings for Seattle set a record at the local airport.

VICKI HILLHOUSE

Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA -- Air travel at the Walla Walla Regional Airport continued its record-breaking ascent in 2009.

Boardings on the three daily flights to Seattle made history for the third consecutive year, according to new figures from carrier Horizon Air.

The number of passengers flying from Walla Walla to Seattle in 2009 shot up 13 percent from 2008, when the numbers also made the record books. According to the figures, 33,430 people flew to Seattle from the local airport, compared to the previous year when 29,582 passengers departed Walla Walla.

The number of people flying into the community grew even more. The 33,898 people who flew from Seattle to Walla Walla in 2009 represented a 14.9 percent increase from 2008.

Local airport and travel industry officials believe the increases are largely attributed to the bigger airplanes introduced by Horizon early last year. The introduction of the 76-seat Q400 planes more than doubled capacity for air travelers, making it possible for more people to fly during peak travel times.

"Prior to the 76-seat planes we were finding we did not have enough seats to get people in and out of Walla Walla," said airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund. "The capacity really helped."

At the same time, the community's inability to fill the larger planes has also led Seattle-based Horizon to reduce Walla Walla's schedule from three daily flights to two. The new schedule began Wednesday.

The increase in boardings is a continued sign to officials of the importance of air travel options in the community. With several locally based corporations and three colleges, the community relies on air travel for commerce, as well as leisure travel, said Port of Walla Walla Commissioner and World Wide Travel Service owner Paul Schneidmiller.

"There were times where we had entire days on the three-flight schedule completely sold out," Schneidmiller said.

Vicki Hillhouse can be reached at vickihillhouse@wwub.com or 526-8321. out of the community -

A new two-flight schedule at the Walla Walla Regional Airport got off to a turbulent start Wednesday.

Fog from the previous night prompted the cancelation of the 6:50 a.m. flight Wednesday. Local travel and airport officials said the plane was expected to be full.

"We didn't get off to a good start, but that's basically a fog problem," said Paul Schneidmiller, a Port of Walla Walla commissioner and the owner of World Wide Travel Service.

Despite a willful Mother Nature, Schneidmiller said the schedule will get better throughout the first half

of the year.

The afternoon departure currently scheduled for 5:10 p.m. will be bumped starting Jan. 17 to 4 p.m. That flight will be adjusted again April 12, when it moves to a 3:10 p.m. departure time.

Members of the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce Air Travel Coalition have lobbied for the earlier afternoon flight to better accommodate both visitors coming into town, as well as those headed to Seattle.

"The schedule changes are going in the right direction," Schneidmiller said. "Even though they might seem minor, they help in getting our numbers to a level acceptable to Horizon Air."

He said he believes the airline has heard the pleas from the community and continues to adjust the flights to the best of its ability to help fit Walla Walla.

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