

Airline: More passengers needed to, from Walla Walla

Alaska Airlines wants an average of six more passengers on each flight in and out of the city.

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Walla Walla's air carrier needs a few more passengers for takeoff.

Alaska Airlines, the community's only air carrier, told local officials this week the market is profitable but is not meeting its projected return on investment.

The airline wants to increase the load factor on flights from about 60 percent to 68 percent. Port Executive Director Jim Kuntz said in Thursday's Port commission meeting that equates to 24 people per day -- about six more passengers on both inbound and both outbound flights -- or about 8,700 people per year. Officials believe the increase could be braced by some inexpensive marketing initiatives.

What might happen if those aren't successful wasn't entirely clear when a contingency of local government and business representatives met with Alaska managers Wednesday.

"There was nothing in the meeting that said they weren't going to service Walla Walla, but they made it clear we need to work hard to meet their projections," Kuntz said.

Kuntz was joined by Port Commissioner Paul Schneidmiller, Airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund, Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce CEO David Woolson, Chamber Vice President of Public Policy and Business Development Damien Sinnott and Coffey Communication executive and frequent flyer Kip Kelly in the meeting.

"The good news is the Walla Walla market is profitable for Alaska Airlines," Kuntz said.

He said the Port and community can make several inexpensive measures to remind travelers about the air service. Easy access to booking flights can be linked on local websites. The Port and airport can also increase their visibility through social networking, added Skoglund. She said there may also be opportunities to market to residents in Pendleton, who are currently served by a nine-passenger aircraft.

Kuntz said building air travel will also be contingent on overcoming two myths about local service. One: Flying out of Pasco is always cheaper. Two: No good connections can be made out of Walla Walla.

He said most fares on the airline are common-rated between Walla Walla and Pasco, which means flying local will save travelers the cost of gas and parking. And those who

take off on the 6:50 a.m. flight out of Walla Walla will come upon about 60 or so connections upon arriving at Sea-Tac.

The airline's conversion to a complete Q400 fleet more than doubled capacity for local air travelers when the 76-seat planes were introduced to Walla Walla in early 2009. Since then the three-flight schedule has been reduced to two daily flights from Walla Walla to Seattle.

Commissioner Schneidmiller said the schedule is "about as optimal a two-flight schedule as you can have," catering to those who need to make a day trip to Seattle for business.

Kuntz said airline officials seemed open to working with the community on building loads.

"I think they want to work with us," he said. "This is a market they've been in for a very long time."

Horizon Air has operated commercial service in the community. Its parent company, the Alaska Air Group, announced plans early this year to retire the airline's public brand and replace it with that of Horizon's sister company Alaska Airlines. The brand change followed a Jan. 1 switch to a new business model. Under a "capacity purchase agreement" model, Horizon operates and maintains its aircraft while Alaska covers scheduling, marketing and pricing of the flights. Horizon's existing markets, including Walla Walla's, will continue to receive service.

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