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Jump in local air travel is good for the community

Having commercial air service in and out of Walla Walla is a key to maintaining the Valley's economic health.

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Reliable and affordable commercial air service is critical to keeping the Walla Walla Valley's economy thriving.

Yet, keeping planes flying in and out of the Walla Walla Regional Airport has been a tricky balancing act. In order to turn a profit for Alaska Airlines (formerly Horizon Air) and also serve the needs of the community, the daily air service to Seattle must be at convenient times and priced right.

The Port of Walla Walla, which operates the airport, and a coalition of community leaders have been working closely with Alaska for years to find the right mix.

It was reported this week that air travel in and out of Walla Walla is on the upswing. It appears balance -- or close to it -- has been found.

The number of folks flying out of the Walla Walla airport has climbed every month this year to a record-breaking high.

Four out of the last six months have shown double-digit percentage increases, according to figures released this week.

June and July posted the highest numbers to date. In June, 2,837 passengers boarded at the airport. That's a 13.8 percent increase from the same period in 2010. The next best June came in 2001, when 2,821 passengers flew out of Walla Walla even with more daily flights.

This July saw a 20.8 percent increase over the same month a year ago as 2,524 passengers took to the air. The next busiest July was in 2001, when 2,443 people traveled.

A variety of factors are attributed to the upswing. Port of Walla Walla Commissioner Paul Schneidmiller, who owns World Wide Travel Service, cited the stabilization of the flight schedule, Alaska Airline's reliability flying out of the community and its decision to match the price of tickets to Seattle out of Pasco.

Above all else, the price match, combined with the price of gasoline just shy of \$4 a gallon, might be driving the higher numbers. Flying to Seattle for business or pleasure is now more cost effective.

It wasn't all that long ago that service to Walla Walla was threatened as the number of folks flying was at a point where air service here wouldn't be profitable over the long run.

Advocates in Walla Walla talked with Alaska/Horizon officials to ensure there would be at least two flights a

day and those flights would be timed so folks could make connections out of Seattle or go to Seattle and back in a day for business meetings.

Several companies based in Walla Walla -- Banner Bank, Key Technology and Coffey Communications, to name a few -- count on reliable air service out of Walla Walla as they do business throughout the Northwest, nation and the world.

In addition, air service is critical to the tourism industry. It serves to get tourists into the area. It gets those who promote the Valley and its products, such as wine, out of the area to spread the word.

It's important this trend in air travel continue. It's great for the people of the Valley and, of course, its economy.