

Port Officials Perplexed by Alaska Airline Flight Change



The change would push Walla Walla's evening flight to an arrival time of almost midnight.

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A new schedule change for Alaska Airlines may be good for night owls but has local officials concerned it will cause travelers to fly out of other communities.

Travel officials have gotten word that the Seattle airline plans to change its flight schedule for a late night arrival into Walla Walla.

The last flight out of Seattle that currently lands in Walla Walla at 8:25 p.m. would move to an 11 p.m. Seattle departure. That puts the last arriving flight in Walla Walla at about 11:50 p.m., said Port of Walla Walla Executive Director Jim Kuntz.

The morning flight time would remain the same out of Walla Walla at 6:25 a.m.

The move is a huge concern to Port and Walla Walla Regional Airport operators, Kuntz said.

"We think this could substantially affect ridership," he said.

The change appears to be temporary — to begin March 9 and run through June 7. But that, too, could change, Port Commission President Paul Schneidmiller said.

The Port has not heard directly from Alaska Airlines, Kuntz and Schneidmiller said. Schneidmiller stumbled upon the scheduling change when he was booking a flight for one of his clients at World Wide Travel Service.

Calls to the airline from the Port had not yet been returned as of this morning.

Dozens of comments on the Walla Walla Regional Airport's Facebook page showed mixed responses from travelers.

Many said the change could provide a better opportunity for those flying in from the East Coast to make a connection straight into Walla Walla.

But for business travelers making a day trip to Seattle, the schedule would make for an impossibly long day, officials fear. It could also affect tourism if visitors can't make it into town for a weekend trip until 11:50 at night, at least one innkeeper said.

Passenger traffic at the Walla Walla Regional Airport has been on the rise this year — a direction airport operators are keenly moving toward in order to keep air service in town.

Schneidmiller said the benefits of the later inbound flight would reach a much smaller percentage of the airline's customers. Consequently, he fears Walla Walla's air passenger numbers would drop.

"I would give a different answer if we had a three-flight schedule, but that's not what we have," he said.

The timing is particularly perplexing as Walla Walla invests upward of \$300,000 in a marketing campaign promoting the benefits of flying locally.

Most of that money — \$250,000 — came through a federal grant designed to market the community to bolster and ultimately save air service. But officials say the schedule switch could hurt more than help. The rest of the funds were matching dollars.

"I'm not sure exactly what (Alaska's) strategy is," Kuntz said this morning. "I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt that they looked at an 11 o'clock flight as in the best interest of Walla Walla."