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American picked for Sioux City airport routes

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By Dave Dreeszen and Molly Montag Journal staff writers | Posted: Thursday, December 8, 2011 3:13 pm | (9) Comments

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Submitted photo
An American Eagle Embraer regional jet prepares for takeoff in this submitted photo. Eagle, a regional carrier for American Airlines, would fly the same 50-seat aircraft at Sioux Gateway Airport, where it has been awarded an Essential Air Service contract.

SIOUX CITY -- Travelers flying out of Sioux Gateway Airport will switch destinations, from Minneapolis to Chicago, in the coming months, according to a report Thursday.

The U.S. Department of Transportation has selected a regional carrier of American Airlines to fly subsidized routes at the Sioux City airport, said U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa.

American Eagle spokesman Ed Martelle emphasized the DOT had not formally notified the Fort Worth, Texas-based airline about the decision.

"We understand that Sen. Harkin has announced the DOT decision and are delighted about the selection," Martelle said in an email.

American Eagle will start offering 13 flights per week between Sioux Gateway and Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, Harkin said in his news release. The airline asked for an annual subsidy of about \$1.5 million to fly the routes.

The DOT selected American over the only other bidder for the Essential Air Service contract, a regional carrier for Delta Air Lines. Atlanta-based Delta is currently the lone airline at Sioux Gateway, offering two flights daily to Minneapolis/St. Paul.

The federal agency followed the recommendation of local leaders. The Sioux Gateway Board of Trustees and the City Council both sided with American, arguing the carrier offered the best chance for the local

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airport to add flights and a second hub in the future.

The DOT's decision-making process came in the midst of American's parent company filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on Nov. 28. The airline said it would continue to operate as normal while it reorganizes.

Sioux Gateway Director Curt Miller said he has been told it takes 90 to 120 days for a new carrier to begin service. He said the DOT will require Delta to continue service at Sioux Gateway until American begins its flights, most likely in March or April.

Based on discussions with American officials, Miller said, the switch could be a fresh start for air service in Sioux City.

"I believe we've got some opportunities here to really turn things around at the airport and actually expand service here for our customers and to retain customers who have been going other places to fly," he said.

Harkin is a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee that played a key role in permitting both Sioux City and Waterloo, Iowa, to join the EAS program, which supports air service in smaller, mostly rural markets. American Eagle will also start serving Waterloo, replacing Delta.

"Connecting Sioux City and Waterloo air service through O'Hare will improve the flying options for travelers, while, at the same time, create and preserve jobs in both areas," Harkin said in the statement.

A Delta spokesperson did not immediately return a call to the Journal seeking comment.

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Posted in A1 on Thursday, December 8, 2011 3:13 pm Updated: 7:07 pm. | Tags: American Airlines, Sioux Gateway Airport, Chicago, Sioux City, Delta

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