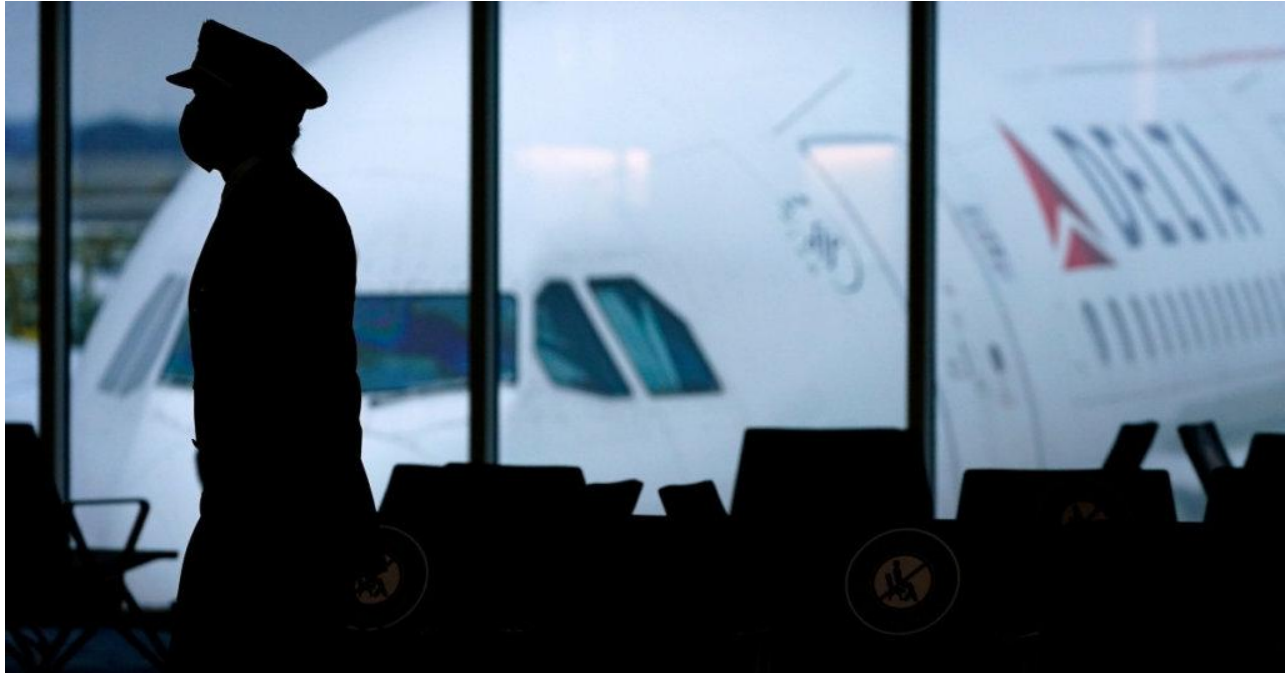


Iowa Small-Market Airline Service Continues Decline: Part One

Posted June 29th, 2022 at 11:48am by [Guest Post](#)



 (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

What's happening with airports across the country as airlines deal with staffing shortages, capacity constraints, and delayed and canceled flights is nothing new to Iowa's smaller-commercial airports. In a three-part series, Twitter user [@Airspacelowa](#) will explain what's been hindering Iowa's smaller airports and what it means for their future.

Part One: The pilot shortage impact

In the span of a few months, five small Iowa commercial airport markets were notified by three airlines that they will no longer have passenger service in the near future due to the nationwide shortage of airline pilots.

ADVERTISEMENT On June 22, [American Airlines](#) gave notice to the [Dubuque Regional Airport](#) that on Sept. 7, its subsidiary Envoy Airlines would be halting twice-daily service to Chicago. Dubuque joins Fort Dodge, Mason City, and Sioux City, which heard similar news from United Airlines' regional partner SkyWest back in March. Burlington was also given the bad news by independent carrier Cape Air in May.

At the moment, all four previously-notified airports still have airline service because of the federal government-subsidized Essential Air Service (EAS) contracts those airlines agreed to—they can't leave until a new carrier is able to serve the market. So while these airports may continue to have some level of scheduled service, it's likely to be a significant step down from the twice-daily 50-seat jets Dubuque, Fort Dodge, Mason City, and Sioux City had recently.

More likely is that a small EAS-only airline such as Southern Airways Express, which operates as a charter carrier with fewer limits on pilot experience and much smaller aircraft, might step in and provide once or twice-daily scheduled flights with eight-seat Cessna Caravans—single-engine turboprops.

Dubuque, IA DBC										Mason City, IA MCW									
DTW	940a	100p	2809	SF3	X67	1	377	MSP	500a	645a	2800	SF3	X67	1	120				
DTW	1255p	415p	2977	SF3	X6	1	377	MSP	640a	875a	2868	SF3	6	1	120				
DTW	240p	600p	2977	SF3	6	1	377	MSP	755a	817a	3211	SF3	X67	1	120				
DTW	420p	735p	2903	SF3	X6	1	377	MSP	850a	1040a	2800	SF3	7	1	120				
MSP	730a	835a	3077	SF3	X7	1	212	MSP	1140a	1235p	3201	SF3			120				
MSP	820a	1035a	2857	SF3	7		212	MSP	100p	160p	2845	SF3			120				
							212	MSP	300p	350p	3185	SF3	67		120				
							212	MSP	445p	545p	2847	SF3	X67	1	120				
							212	MSP	605p	750p	2930	SF3			120				
							212												

Sioux City, IA SUX										Fl. Dodge, IA FOD									
MBS	1255p	533p	984	DC9	X8	1	828	MSP	635a	817a	3211	SF3	X67	1	168				
MSP	530a	627a	422	D9S	X7		234	MSP	725a	825a	2888	SF3	6		168				
MSP	645a	805a	3075	SF3	X6		234	MSP	1055a	1235p	3201	SF3			168				
MSP	905a	1025a	3219	SF3			234	MSP	220p	355p	3195	SF3	67	1	168				
MSP	1100a	1218p	3173	SF3			234	MSP	400p	545p	2847	SF3	X67	1	168				
MSP	1255p	200p	984	DC9			234	MSP	650p	750p	2930	SF3			168				
MSP	255p	410p	2767	SF3			234												
MSP	435p	555p	3168	SF3			234												
MSP	620p	743p	2993	SF3			234												
MSP	815p	925p	3218	SF3	X8		234												
YYZ	530a	1015a	422	D9S	X7	1	S 852												

Screenshots of Northwest Airlines’ April 1999 timetable depicting service from these four Iowa cities. Sioux City had two 90-seat DC-9 jets per day in addition to multiple 31-seat Saab 340 turboprops to Minneapolis. Dubuque, Fort Dodge, and Mason City all had four or more flights per day.

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 In terms of the pilot shortage, regional airlines such as SkyWest and Envoy have been hit harder than mainline carriers due to regional airlines’ space in the pilot talent pipeline—typically as the first airline job for new first officers (co-pilots). Since major airlines such as American, Delta, Southwest, and United pay higher than regionals, pilots with a year or two of regional experience under their belt are now quickly able to jump to a major airline. And the constraints on scheduled airlines hiring new airline pilots is fairly high; new first officers can’t be hired unless they have 1,500 hours or more of total flight time—also known as the 1,500-hour rule.

As you might imagine, it takes a long time to train a pilot and build that time. For the past two decades, most new airline pilots come from a civilian background as opposed to the military. In the civilian training pipeline, it takes a year or two minimum of training to become a commercial pilot or flight instructor. Then it takes another year or two of flight instructing new pilots or on-demand charter flying to build enough hours to earn an Airline Transport Pilot rating at 1,500 hours.

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 The military still provides its fair share of airline pilots, but their contribution is measured in the hundreds per year. As the Baby Boomer cohort of airline pilots continue to retire by the thousands annually, ranks of new 1,500-2,000-hour first officers have been filling the demand...just not fast enough to keep up with growth. The pilot shortage is certainly impacting service at larger airports too, but with many more flights to choose from it doesn’t have the same consequences.

Regional airlines are getting creative in trying to find solutions. For instance, [Skywest’s recent announcement to start a “charter” subsidiary](#) would exempt their EAS flights from the 1,500-hour rule by flying their Canadair Regional Jets with only 31 seats. It remains to be seen whether this solution is viable, but even if it is, it still takes a few months to hire more pilots, safely train them in simulators, and get them through a satisfactory 25-hour initial operating experience before they’re qualified.

The pilot shortage is just the most recent impact in a long line of regulatory and demographic changes that have reduced airline service for small markets, mirroring other trends that have left rural communities with fewer services and opportunities than larger markets.

Part two will dive into the past few decades worth of Iowa airline history.

by [@AirspaceIowa](#)

06/29/22

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