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Iowa airports report increase in passengers

BY BRENT GRIFFITHS | MAY 17, 2013 5:00 AM

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Officials from Iowa's two biggest airports point to budget airlines and the re-emergence of demand that withered during the recession as reasons for a continuing increase in the number of passengers.

"The economy of the corridor is doing extremely well, and businesses are expanding and putting travel back into their budgets," said Tim Bradshaw, the director of the Eastern Iowa Airport.

"People also have more disposable incomes, and with the pent-up demand from the recession people are starting to travel more."

The Eastern Iowa Airport near Cedar Rapids has set passenger records in the last three months — a record pace, which was welcomed by the chairwoman of the Cedar Rapids Airport Commission.

"The commission members and management are very pleased with the record numbers of passengers traveling through the airport for the past three months and believe that the increase is strongly influenced by the improvement in the corridor economy and the addition last year of a low cost carrier to the line up of air service providers," said Carroll Reasoner, the chairwoman of the Cedar Rapids Airport Commission and University of Iowa general counsel.

However, beyond customers' budgets, other officials point to Frontier Airlines beginning service to the airport last year along with AirTran pulling out of the Quad Cities International Airport as other reasons for the record setting growth.

Des Moines International Airport — the biggest in the state — has also seen an increase in passengers over a one-year period, with an 8.3 percent increase from the time between April 2012 to March 2013 and the year before, April 2011 to March 2012.

One official at the Des Moines Airport said its increase is also partially due to another budget airline. Southwest Airlines began service in Des Moines in September 2012.

"Basically, last September, we got Southwest Airlines here, and for the first time ever in 2012 we hit over 2 million passengers," said Don Smithey, the executive director of the Des Moines Airport Authority. "[Southwest] provided a low-cost carrier we needed for many years."

Smithey said the Eastern Iowa Airport isn't currently at the point to be a major competitor with Des Moines.

One official with the Cedar Rapids-based airport agreed with this point and believes the strong performance of the two airports is a good sign for Iowa's economy.

"If two major airports in the state are doing well, then the state is doing well," said Heather Wilson, director of marketing and communication for the Eastern Iowa Airport. "Des Moines and Cedar Rapids [Airports] are doing well. It is a pretty good indicator major metro areas have strong economies."

However, Bradshaw said, the two airports do share some boundaries when it comes to their service areas.

Beyond the airports' recent success, Bradshaw and other officials will soon be focused on the airport master plan. Previously under consideration, the plan will address the over 20-year-old terminal,

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