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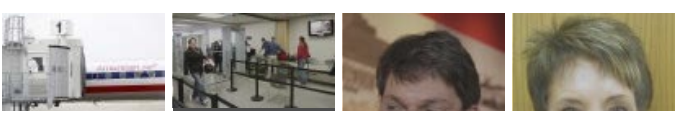
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SIoux GATEWAY AIRPORT

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Sioux City airport officials tout American's first-year showing

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Jim Lee, Sioux City Journal

Passengers exit an American Airlines flight at Sioux Gateway Airport on Thursday. Airport officials said the carrier's first-year performance in Sioux City is evidence they made the right decision in selecting the airline.

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SIoux CITY | For local travelers like Patrick Kuehl, last year's switch in carriers and destinations has made it more convenient to fly in and out of Sioux Gateway Airport.

A year ago this week, American Airlines began two daily round trips between Sioux City and Chicago. In the process, American dislodged rival Delta Air Lines, which had offered connecting routes to Minneapolis, as the lone carrier at Sioux Gateway.

"I like Delta and going to Minneapolis too, but Chicago is more convenient for the business we do," said Kuehl, executive vice president of Great West Casualty Co. in South Sioux City. "It just seems like after getting to Chicago, there's more opportunities to go elsewhere."

With Chicago topping the list of destinations for tri-state leisure and business travelers, local leaders backed American's bid for an Essential Air Service contract over a competing proposal from Delta. The U.S. Department of Transportation in late 2011 awarded American a two-year, \$1.51 million subsidy to serve the Northwest Iowa airport.

The funding is given to smaller airports with limited flight service.

Sioux Gateway officials said American's first-year performance is evidence they made the right decision.

"Almost from day one, they've met or exceeded our expectations," Dave Bernstein, president of the Sioux Gateway board of trustees, said of American. "The service is getting heavily used. We knew there was a significant pent up demand for flights to and through Chicago."

American also is "very pleased" with its first year of service, spokesman Matt Miller said.

"We look forward to continuing our partnership with the city of Sioux City, the Siouxland Chamber of Commerce and the local community," Miller said in a statement.

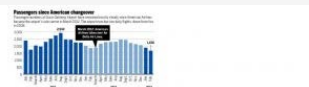
Through the end of February, 23,874 passengers had boarded American flights at Sioux Gateway. The totals are similar to the 24,991 enplanements Delta had in the same 11-month period, with a few important caveats, airport Director Curt Miller said.

For starters, the regional jets Delta used for part of that time were somewhat larger than the 50-seat aircraft American typically flies. For five of the 11 months, Delta also offered three daily flights, compared to America's two. Around August 2011, Delta dropped one flight after informing the DOT it would no longer serve the airport without an EAS grant, Curt Miller said.

From August 2011 until it ended service here, Delta also offered a minimum 14 flights per week, compared to 13 for

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Dec. 8, 2011: DOT awards two-year, \$1.51 million contract to American.

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American, which has just a single flight on Saturdays, Curt Miller said.

Curt Miller said American flights are running 80-85 percent full, above the industry average, and somewhat higher than Delta's previous load factor.

Local officials said American's fares to and through Chicago also are competitive, giving tri-state travelers fewer reasons to drive to larger airports in Omaha or Sioux Falls to catch flights.

"I think a lot of people find, 'Oh my gosh. I can actually fly from here and it's a good fare," said Chriss Camenzend, owner of Premier Travel & Cruise in Sioux City.

Individual fares vary greatly, though, depending on the travel date, length of stay, and number of unsold seats.

Local leaders say they have made a compelling case for American adding flights, or adding a new hub, something airline executives promised to consider as they asked for the local officials' support during the EAS bidding process.

Since then, American has entered and emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and entered into a \$11 billion merger with US Airways, which would give birth to a mega carrier with more passengers than any other in the world.

It will take months to gain all the approvals for the deal, and perhaps years before the two systems are fully consolidated. In the meantime, the two companies will continue to operate as separate airlines.

So far, the biggest obstacle toward adding flights, Curt Miller said, has been a shortage of aircraft sized right for this market.

If the combined airline eliminates duplicate routes, that could free up more planes, he said.

Kuehl said adding a western route would provide travelers like himself another incentive to fly out of Sioux Gateway, rather than drive to Omaha's Eppley Airfield.

"It's such a relief when you land to be 20 minutes from home, instead of an hour and a half," he said.

Tags Minneapolis, O Hare International Airport, Us Airways, Aviation, Chicago, Sioux City, Patrick Kuehl, Sioux Gateway Airport, Delta Air Lines, Great West Casualty Co., Essential Air Service, Curt Miller, American Airlines, South Sioux City, Delta, U.s. Department Of Transportation, Dave Bernstein, Matt Miller, Siouxland Chamber Of Commerce, Omaha, Sioux Falls, Chriss Camenzend

Chicago O'Hare International Airport; Delta ends service in Sioux City.

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