

## Rockford airport makes changes on the fly

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No sooner did United Airlines fly the coop than the Chicago Rockford International Airport announced that Atlanta-based Southern Skyways would pick up the slack and offer nonstop service to Denver ... and Detroit.

United had been offering nonstop service to Denver – a major hub to points west – since March 3, 2006. But company spokesman Jeff Kovick said efforts to make the twice-daily route profitable were unsuccessful.

“There was not enough customer response,” he said. “About three quarters of all tickets sold were for \$150 or less.”

Kovick said a series of weekly meetings with airport managers led to fare increases in an attempt to counteract record-breaking fuel costs. Fares ranged up to \$927 for a round-trip, full-fare ticket. But rather than bolstering the bottom line, higher fares caused ridership on the 50-seat jets to decline. United notified the Greater Rockford Airport Authority on Feb. 29 that it would be discontinuing service June 4.

The airline is working with passengers booked on later flights to make alternative accommodations. Kovick said the Milwaukee airport and O'Hare were options.

Bob O'Brien, Rockford airport's executive director, characterized the negotiations differently. Fuel costs and higher fares were just part of the story.

“They were not willing or able to go to a bigger jet,” he said. “The United product wasn't a perfect fit.”

Southern Skyways will serve Rockford using 115-seat, DC9-30 aircraft.

O'Brien said he had been negotiating with Southern Skyways for about three years to offer flights to Jackson Hole, Wyo., and Niagara Falls, N.Y., when the Denver vacuum arose. Southern Skyways already agreed to provide new charter service from Rockford to Myrtle Beach, S.C., starting May 23. The Detroit route, which had not been offered since Northwest Airlines left Rockford in 2006, followed.

“This wasn't an egg that just hatched. It takes a lot of time, a lot of conversations, and a lot of passing information back and forth,” said Cary Evans, Skyways' executive vice president. “The opportunity presented itself, and we were there.”

Southern Skyways was established by Aviation Advantage Inc. to meet the air transportation needs of the leisure industry. It will provide nonstop service to Denver and Detroit starting June 6.

Flights will leave Rockford three times a week – on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Flights leave for Denver at 11 a.m. Outgoing flights to Detroit are slated to leave at 7 a.m. O'Brien said 123 tickets were sold to Denver on Monday, the first day reservations opened.

“We believe if you cut the nonsense out and there are no shenanigans, with predictable price and free parking, it will be a home run,” O'Brien said. “We were bound and determined to have nonstop service, and we think we can provide it in a more hassle-free, cost-effective way. The legacy airlines don't have a corner on providing a good product.”

The Rockford airport now will offer nine nonstop destinations. Allegiant Air offers charter jet service to Las Vegas; Orlando, Clearwater/St. Petersburg and Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.; and Phoenix/Mesa, Ariz. Apple Vacations flies to Cancun, Mexico.

O'Brien said ridership had jumped from 1,400 passengers in 2002 to a record 23,273 passengers last month, a 25 percent increase from February 2007. The previous record of 23,166 was posted in March 2007.