

Economy, traffic fuel commercial-service talk

By John Wolcott
SCBJ Editor

Establishing scheduled commercial air service at Paine Field is gaining fresh attention from people who see an option to fighting clogged freeways to Sea-Tac airport.

While no one expects — or is lobbying for — a Sea-Ev regional airport, there is growing interest in short-range commuter flights from Everett, perhaps with routes linking Snohomish County to Yakima, Spokane, Portland or other popular destinations in the Northwest.

Adding scheduled commercial flights to the airport's array of services would boost the county's economy, supporters say, creating new jobs, new terminal facilities and a new attraction for companies looking for expansion sites.

"We need to start somewhere. It's time to quit putting it off. Aviation is a big part of any business coming to town," former airport commissioner Hank Robinett said recently. "It's vitally important to the economic future of our county. We need it."

Robinett, who has been lobbying business and government leaders to bring commercial air service to the field, wrote in a recent Herald guest editorial that "Snohomish County is one of the largest counties in the United States with no scheduled airline services."

Former Airport Director George Petrie endorsed Robinett's views in a letter to the Herald, recalling that during the Alaska oil pipeline construction in the late 1970s, the airport had "a flourishing nonscheduled air freight operation, with few noise complaints. ... I've always thought Paine Field could serve the Puget Sound area in the same way San Jose and Oakland (airports) serve the Bay Area."

Tom Hoban, CEO of Coast Management Co. in Everett, notes "there are businesses that choose not to locate in Snohomish County because we don't have good passenger and ... cargo air service."

"There are several compelling reasons why Paine Field should be opened to commercial traffic," added Edmonds businessman Tim Raetzloff, owner of Abarim Business Computers. "... It is ironic that the location of Boeing's biggest commercial production facility is a location where the neighbors won't allow Boeing planes to be used commercially."

Jim Wilkinson, president of Fliteline Services at Paine Field, said he sees “limited, small-scale, scheduled airline service into Paine Field,” so long as the community wants it and the airlines find that option profitable.

Not every airline, he said, is economically tied only to Sea-Tac’s hub or wants to pay the “high cost of operating out of there. . . . If the business community demands this kind of service, you might be surprised at the amount of public and private support you would get.”

Paine Field has the capacity to handle commercial aircraft, but Snohomish County can’t force an airline to start serving the community, Airport Director Dave Waggoner said.

“That’s a decision only an airline can make,” he said, adding that “increasing traffic congestion on I-5 between Everett and Sea-Tac is driving the discussion.”

In the past, most objections to commercial air service have come from noise-sensitive neighbors, but supporters of commercial flights point out that newer aircraft are far quieter than their predecessors, allowing the airport’s noise zones to be reduced to within the airport’s boundaries. In 2002, only 183 noise complaint calls were received from 66 residents out of 200,727 takeoffs and landings documented by the Federal Aviation Administration.

The updated 20-year airport master plan approved last December by the County Council acknowledged the size of the market for commercial air service and projected “commuter service” flights from Paine Field within the next five years, a change that could open the way for some airline flights.

In the meantime, a new tenant at the airport has added an air taxi service to airfields across the Western United States. Skycorp Executive Charters Inc. began service early this year with a Beechcraft King Air turboprop aircraft and plans to add another King Air or a Learjet to its fleet soon.

Don Trumbull, the company’s president and operations director, said he saw that part of the aviation industry “booming right after Sept. 11” as increased airport security measures caused flight delays with major air carriers.