

Skybus expands schedule

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CHICOPEE - Skybus Airlines is adding new flights to Westover Metropolitan Airport. Starting on Thursday, a flight to Greensboro, N.C., will be added. On March 7, the discount passenger airline will add a second daily flight to Columbus, Ohio, where Skybus headquarters is based. Currently, the airport offers one daily flight, which is to Columbus.

"Things are going well," Skybus spokesman Robert Tenenbaum said yesterday. "It means the destination that you're adding flights to is a good one."

The airline continues to add flights and cities to its service area, which currently includes 18 cities around the United States, but did post a \$16 million loss during the three-month period that ended on Sept. 30.

Skybus launched its first flight in May and debuted at Westover in July. Both Skybus and Westover representatives said the \$16 million loss was expected. "First of all, that was planned for," Tenenbaum said. "The senior executives have said they hope to break even early this year and make a profit some time this year."

Tenenbaum said there are no plans to change the airline's model, which includes offering 10, \$10 seats on each flight. Other ticket prices range from \$30 upwards, with the best deals available when a flight is booked well in advance.

Allan W. Blair, president and chief executive officer of Westover Metropolitan Development Corp., which owns the airport, said the company's financial loss doesn't worry him. "I'm not concerned," Blair said. "They anticipated a loss in the first quarter. It's a new business." "A start-up almost always has start-up costs that exceed revenues," he said. "Their service is reliable and their passenger loads are at or above expectation."

Skybus is Westover's first regular passenger service in about 20 years. Blair said the 155-passenger A319 jets are averaging 100 passengers a flight out of Westover. "We always felt this market would be responsive," Blair said. "This (the added flights) shows the market here has responded well to the service."

The Greensboro flight will allow passengers to connect to three airports in Florida, Blair said. The Greensboro flight will arrive at 12:09 p.m. and depart at 12:34 p.m. Tenenbaum said.

Currently, the only daily flight from Columbus arrives at 1:26 p.m. and departs at 1:51 p.m. On March 7, that flight will switch to an 11:23 a.m. arrival and 11:48 a.m. departure. The second Columbus flight will arrive at 8:24 p.m. and depart at 8:49 p.m.

"Over the last six months the passenger loads on that flight have gotten better," Tenenbaum said. "It has consistently built. It's become one of the strongest routes."

Tenenbaum said the success of the Columbus route has been helped by word of mouth and the convenient location of Chicopee to Boston, Springfield, Hartford and the Berkshires.

Skybus will have a total of nine planes on Thursday, but the plan is to have a fleet of 73 by the end of 2012, Tenenbaum said.