

Four airlines bid for route at Thief River Falls Airport

By Adam Kurtz
Grand Forks Herald

Three airlines have submitted proposals to the United States Department of Transportation to provide Essential Air Service from Thief River Falls Airport to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, in addition to Boutique Air, which has the current contract for the route.

The other airlines making bids for the route are Denver Air Connection, Air Choice One and Southern Airways Express LLC.

The additional bidders come at a time when Boutique Air has had recent difficulty with the cancellation of flights. According to Thief River Falls Airport manager Joe Hedrick, Boutique canceled 21 flights of a scheduled 186 in October. In August, 17 flights were canceled. All of the cancellations were considered "controllable" — meaning they were not due to weather or other factors beyond the airline's control. In June, 12 round trip flights were canceled with one flight cancellation considered "not-controllable."

Despite its recent problems with cancellations, Hedrick said he would feel OK with Boutique being reselected for another two-year EAS contract.

"It wouldn't be bad; I wouldn't feel bad about it," he said. "It's going to be a tough decision."

Boutique CEO Shawn Simpson visited Thief River

Falls in October to speak to the Airport Authority and local business and community leaders about issues the airline is facing. He said a shortage of pilots, mechanical problems as well as delays in getting parts, have contributed to the cancellations.

Kevin Brown, vice president for brand and communications at Digi-Key, one of the largest employers in the region, said company leaders love the idea of having a local flight. He said they are appreciative that Simpson had been responsive to the company in the past.

"That said, many of our business partners travel to see us from great distances, often from Asia or Europe," said Brown. "It's the last leg of a long flight, and there needs to be a high degree of confidence they can get in and out on time. So the surety of flights and other options with (Grand Forks International Airport) are simply a reality in those instances."

San Francisco-based Boutique's bid for a new term, which would begin June 1, is to offer 18 weekly round trip flights to Minneapolis, on a Pilatus PC-12. The airline is asking for a subsidy of more than \$3.5 million for the first year of a renewed contract, and \$3.6 million for the second year. It currently receives more than \$3.4 million in subsidies for the final year of its contract. The company offers fares as low as \$120 round trip.



Grand Forks Herald file photo

Passengers file off a Boutique Air flight at Thief River Falls, Minn.

Englewood, Colorado-based Denver Air Connection, a subsidiary of Key Lime Air, has proposed to make 12 round trip flights per week, but using a larger jet, either an Embraer ERJ-145, which has a seating capacity of 50, or a Dornier 328, which can seat 30. The company also has an interline agreement with United Airlines, which means customers can use United Airline's website to book tickets and can check bags to any of United's destinations. The airline is asking for a subsidy of almost \$4 million, with an average fare of \$99.

Air Choice One, based in St. Louis, Mo., put in a bid for two- and four-year contracts with the DOT, at either 12 or 18 round trip flights per week, with an average fare of \$90. At 18 flights per week, the aircraft would seat nine passengers, and the subsidy the airline included in its bid for both two- and four-year contracts, starts at just over \$3.7 million, for

the first year. For 12 round trip flights per week, the airline would offer 19 seats per flight, and for a two year contract would ask for \$3.1 million for the first year. For a four year contract the asked for subsidy would decrease slightly to just under \$3.1 million per year.

Southern Airways Express LLC is based in Mississippi. That airline has also proposed two and four year contracts, with a Cessna C-208 aircraft, at either 18 or 21 round trip flights per week, with nine seats available for passengers. Southern Airways Express also has an interline agreement with American Airlines. It bid almost \$3.4 million for 18 round trip flights per week, and \$3.6 million for 21. The average fare would be \$68, according to the airline's bid.

Hedrick offered praise

for the Boutique, which he said has raised the profile of Thief River Falls Airport.

"Boutique has done so much to make our market stand out," he said. "Two years ago we didn't have a 50-passenger jet that was bidding on our market. That's due to the work that Boutique has put in to build the market up and reflected in the passenger numbers."

The next step is for the Thief River Falls Airport Authority to meet, discuss the proposals and submit community comments to the DOT, which must be completed by Dec. 13. The ultimate decision, according to Hedrick, lies with DOT, so if the Airport Authority would like to see a particular airline get the EAS contract, it could be awarded to a different one.

"There's a lot of moving parts to that," said Hedrick about the selection process.

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