



Submitted photo

The Embraer EMB-145, a 50-seat jet, is one of the aircraft Denver Air Connection is proposing to use at Thief River Falls Regional Airport.

Denver Air to provide service at TRF airport

By Adam Kurtz
Grand Forks Herald

The long road of selecting an airline to provide Essential Air Service at Thief River Falls Airport has come to an end.

The U.S. Department of Transportation, on Thursday, Feb. 27, issued an order selecting Denver Air Connection to replace Boutique Air, which has operated at Thief River Falls since June 2018. Denver Air's two-year contract runs from June 2020 to May 2022 and has the possibility of being renewed. The contract requires Denver Air to provide 12 round-trip flights per week to Minneapolis using either a 30- or 50-seat jet.

"That's exactly what we wanted. We're really excited to have Denver Air come in and replace Boutique," said airport manager Joe Hedrick. "I foresee a lot more leisure and business travel once the service takes over, so I think it really makes for a bright future at the airport."

Denver Air Connection's proposal to the airport board in Thief River Falls and accepted by the DOT states the average fare for a one-way flight to Minneapolis would be \$99, an increase from Boutique, which has offered fares as low as \$59.

A DOT document issued on Feb. 27 states that passengers have increased since May 2019, but the increase can be attributed to lowered fares by Boutique, which has struggled with reliability - a chief concern for the airport board

and local employers.

Data provided by Hedrick to the DOT show that Boutique managed a 90% reliability rate in 2019 and 82% of its cancellations were due to controllable conditions and were not, for example, weather related. Denver Air Connection's proposal to the airport board focused heavily on its reliability rate of 99.6% and an on-time rate of 94%.

During the community comments period of the airline selection process, Digi-Key Electronics, the community's largest employer, informed the DOT that it "no longer recommends their vendors, suppliers or employees fly in or out of Thief River Falls Airport because of concerns about Boutiques reliability," according to the airline selection document.

Hedrick, in a phone call to the Herald, said the number of passengers taking off from Thief River Falls Airport in 2019 stands at about 5,000. He said he is looking forward to growing that number, which could trigger increased federal funding.

"I kind of am forecasting the 8,000-passenger range," he said. "That would get us \$600,000."

The ultimate goal is to increase passengers to 10,000 per year, which would result in \$1 million in annual federal funding, according to Hedrick.

"I think we won't be able to get there without a 50-passenger jet, so this is the vehicle that we need in order to obtain that goal," he said.

SCHNEIDER

From Page A1

frequent rural patrols.

That's an initiative he believes is paying off.

"We can talk to you if we pulled you over, right? We can talk to you on a domestic, or a theft," Schneider said. "But walking into a grain elevator or a coffee shop at 8 o'clock in the morning for a cup of coffee to say, 'Hi, we're here to serve you,' and acting like a normal person when you're dressed in your clown suit - it's been an adjustment for the guys to do it. But I'm excited to say that the guys are doing it, and just trying to break down that barrier that cops are only here for bad things, right? We're here for good things, too."

Schneider believes more face-to-face interactions in the community directly contributed to a higher rate of community reporting in 2019.

Pushing that goal of higher community involvement required a number of logistical changes within the department, as well as the occasional patrol from Schneider himself

- a pleasant break from his other administrative duties, such as attending meetings or sitting down with media, he said.

Some of those logistical changes include transitioning from eight-hour shifts for deputies to 10-hour shifts, which Schneider said provides even more coverage throughout the week, and also affords deputies more time off in between shifts. Multiple deputies have been moved around within the department, and a few additional deputies have been brought aboard.

Schneider began his term as sheriff with 31 active deputies. Since then, 10 have received promotions or otherwise changed positions, five have left the department and eight have been hired, according to data provided by the county. There are now 34 active deputies on staff.

Four jobs were advertised in the sheriff's department during Schneider's first year, and brought in a total of 67 applicants, with an average of 17 applicants per job posting, and an average of six applicants with prior law enforcement experience, according to the county.

The most recent job posting attracted 18 qualified applicants, Schneider said.

Schneider said considering how difficult it can be to recruit sheriff's deputies, he's proud of those numbers.

"If that many people want to work here, even though we're not even close to the highest paid, we must be doing something right," he said.

Schneider said that as he looks ahead to the coming year, one of his next major focuses will be finding funding for a school resource officer to place in a local school - a task that requires grappling with county budgets, school budgets and grants.

Rost, now a county commissioner, said that was something he strove to accomplish during his term before Schneider. He said that as was the case during his own term, he doesn't see that the money is clearly available for a student resource officer.

"As a county commissioner, I don't know how we fund that," he said. "You know, we have to be fiscally responsible with taxpayer dollars."

Still, he said he has been interested to see Schneider

explore new avenues as a way to increase the department's visibility in schools.

"I felt that I was doing positive things when I was sheriff, and he's continuing to do a lot of the same things," Rost said. "Just maybe from a different perspective."

Overall, Schneider and Rost agreed that 2019 was a smooth year for the sheriff's department with Schneider at the helm.

"Things seem to be getting done," Rost said. "If I could just summarize his first year as sheriff, I think he's done really well."

As Schneider plans for 2020, he emphasized that he plans to lead the department while being mindful of his roots in the department, a value he said he embodies every morning when he puts on the sheriff's badge given to him by Rost, which was given to Rost by the late former sheriff, Dan Hill.

"It's a good reminder, like I said, 'Don't forget where you came from,'" Schneider said. "Remember who set this work forward, and know they weren't perfect, but they got us through."

Regulators worry about changes to Lifeline program

By Matthew Guerry
Forum News Service

ST. PAUL — State regulators worry changes to a federal assistance program could cost some low-income Minnesotans their access to discount phone and broadband services.

Called Lifeline, the program launched in 1985 as a way to make landline telephone service more affordable for poorer households. It has since grown to offer broadband internet and wireless phone service as well.

But in an effort to crack down on fraud and abuse, the Federal Communications Commission has for several years been working to streamline the program's application process. Other social services like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps, have faced similar proposals for reform under the Trump administration.

As the changes to Lifeline take effect in Minnesota, they have stoked fears that some of the pro-

gram's subscribers will lose their discounts in the transition. To qualify for the program, one must provide either proof of income, or show that they are already enrolled in one of five federal benefit programs: SNAP, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income or Veterans Pension and Survivors Pension.

Under the old system, companies that offer Lifeline services in Minnesota could re-enroll their own customers for the program. Recipients of the five programs are automatically considered eligible.

Companies could then ask the Minnesota Department of Human Services to check their subscribers' eligibility against their records of benefit recipients when it came time to re-enroll. One could also apply to the program by providing proof of income.

However, the new system requires Lifeline subscribers to enroll or register again for the program directly through the Uni-

versal Services Administrative Cooperative, or USAC, the nonprofit designated by the FCC to administer it. Some subscribers might already be familiar with the organization because it previously handled outreach and re-enrollment upon request for many of the companies that offer the program's services.

But because the "the USAC is not a household name," as the analysis put it, it tends to receive fewer responses from subscribers than companies do when contacting them on their own. The concern now is that the organization's lack of brand recognition will persist even as it takes on new households to deal with.

Officials worry that, going forward, some Lifeline subscribers might simply dismiss mailings from the USAC or mistake its requests for personal information as a scam.

"That's going to look odd, I think, to a lot of customers," Commissioner John Tuma said at a Public Utilities Commission

meeting on Thursday, Feb. 27. And failure to reapply for the program could cause them to lose out on services for which they still qualify.

Complicating matters is the fact that in Minnesota and several other states, the USAC has not yet connected to state databases of federal benefit recipients. Using the databases, the organization can automatically and electronically re-enroll qualifying Lifeline subscribers each year.

There is no official word on when the USAC will connect to Minnesota's databases, which are maintained by the state Department of Human Services. A spokesperson for the organization said that its new application and re-enrollment system, called National Verifier, currently has access only to the federal Medicaid and Federal Public Housing program databases for automatic re-enrollment.

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ND state superintendent arrested on suspicion of DUI, issues statement

Forum News Service

BISMARCK — The North Dakota Highway Patrol arrested Kirsten Baesler, the state's superintendent of public instruction, on suspicion of driving under the influence Wednesday night, Feb. 26.

Baesler was processed at the Burleigh Morton Detention Center at 10:50 p.m. Wednesday, according to Sgt. Eric Howe.

Her processing did not include taking a mug shot. A \$350 bond was



Baesler

posted for Baesler, and she was released before she was fully booked into the jail, which is why no mug shot was taken, jail Capt. Lisa Wicks said.

Howe could not confirm where Baesler was arrested but did say charges are pending as of Thursday morning.

Baesler released a

statement Thursday morning apologizing for the incident.

"I made a serious mistake last night. I let down my team at the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. I let my family down. I let myself down. I am deeply sorry for my actions," Baesler said. "I am going to learn from this, seek help, and focus on my well-being and health."

Gov. Doug Burgum said in a statement his office supports Baesler's plan to

seek help and focus on her health.

Baesler was first elected as superintendent of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction in 2012. She was reelected in 2016 and has announced she intends to seek reelection again in 2020.

Baesler was also arrested while holding public office in 2015 after a domestic assault incident at her home in Mandan

involving her then-fiance Todd Tschosik. A criminal charge of simple assault related to the arrest was dropped against her in March 2015.

Tschosik was investigated in the summer of 2014 by Orange County, Fla., authorities after allegedly straddling Baesler on a bed with his hands around her neck. Baesler, who was on a business trip for the state

of North Dakota at the time, didn't want police involved in the case and declined to sign a statement. A misdemeanor battery charge against Tschosik was eventually dropped.

Baesler appeared Thursday for a meeting of North Dakota's Board of University and School Lands in Bismarck. She is one of five officials who sit on the board.

FLOODING

From Page A1

Pembina can expect major flooding, with dike patrols and south airport road closures. There is a 50% chance flooding will exceed 52.7 feet, which was the

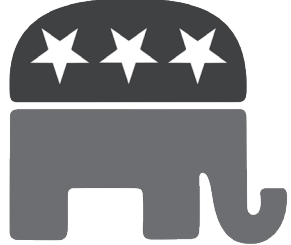
crest of the 2009 flood.

Devils Lake is expected to rise 2 to 3 feet to meet levels last seen in 2015 and 2016. The expected water levels have been reduced slightly since the last outlook and now sits at about 1,450.9 to 1,451.8. The cur-

rent level is 1,448.9.

The spring flood outlook will be updated a final time on Thursday, March 12.

"At this point, we have a lot less winter to go through, and a lot of early spring yet to play out," Gust said.



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