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Is Des Moines getting closer to landing Southwest Airlines?

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Des Moines Aviation Director Don Smithey fields the same question just about every day: "When are you going to get Southwest Airlines?"

"Everybody asks that question," Smithey said. "Even my neighbors do."

Well, lowans, your state's largest airport might be inching closer to checking a big one off your frequent flyer wish list — landing the highly coveted Southwest Airlines at the Des Moines International Airport.

"We don't have a slam dunk here, but we do have an excellent opportunity to get that service," Smithey said.

With that service comes the "Southwest Effect," a phrase used by airline industry insiders to describe the phenomenon of big drops in airfares — sometimes by \$100 or more — when Southwest starts to operate in a new city.

Last week, AirTran Airways, a wholly owned subsidiary of Southwest, started running two daily roundtrip flights between Des Moines and Milwaukee. AirTran service stayed in Des Moines at the same time Southwest and AirTran decided to end it elsewhere, including the Quad City International Airport.

In the 18 months Smithey has been on the job in Des Moines, he said he's had ongoing discussions with Southwest leaders to build their interest in the market.

Southwest officials, meanwhile, have not shared specifics on their intentions in the Des Moines market, but company spokeswoman Ashley Dillon did not rule out their possible arrival in an interview with The Des Moines Register.

The airline hasn't made any decisions about what their future might be in Des Moines, or other markets, Dillon said.

"From the Southwest side, since we integrated with AirTran, we have wanted to grow the brand," Dillon said. "And we want to serve most of the markets that AirTran currently serves."

She added that the two airlines are just getting to know each other's business and looking

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Jason Pulliam



Jason Pulliam covers Des Moines City Hall and Polk County government for the Des Moines Register.

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at the flights that are productive and profitable. "In this environment we have to fly the routes that are profitable, especially when fuel prices are high," she said.

Smithey describes Southwest as "the most sought after airline in the United States," and he is hopeful Iowa's capital will join the list of more than 70 cities the popular, low-fare airline operates in.

When Southwest came to Omaha — where Smithey worked for 24 years before he came to Des Moines — in 1995, they initially offered air service to St. Louis, Phoenix, Las Vegas and Chicago-Midway.

In less than a year after Southwest's arrival in Omaha, Smithey said average fares to those four cities dropped 45 percent and passenger boardings increased 100 percent.

Smithey hopes Des Moines passengers become aware of the new AirTran flights and use the service. That could help prove to Southwest that Des Moines is a good market.

"I think it would be one of the best things for the airport in terms of competition and for our passengers," Smithey said of luring Southwest to Des Moines.

More details on the new AirTran flights out of Des Moines:

Last week, AirTran Airways, a wholly owned subsidiary of Southwest, started running two daily roundtrip flights between Des Moines and Milwaukee. From Milwaukee, the flights go direct to New York and Atlanta.

Previously, AirTran contracted with SkyWest, who flew 50-passenger planes out of Des Moines three times daily. Now, AirTran is using larger, 117-passenger Boeing 717s. Southwest does not plan to use Boeing 717s in its fleet for the long-term, Southwest CEO Gary Kelly said recently, but the planes could help provide an important test run in the Des Moines market.

The new AirTran flights essentially replace service the airline used to provide out of Des Moines through an agreement with the small carrier SkyWest, Inc.

When Southwest completed its acquisition of AirTran in May, company officials announced the agreement with SkyWest would end, affecting Des Moines and other airports in Akron/ Canton, Ohio, Indianapolis, Omaha, Pittsburgh and St. Louis.

Although Southwest officials initially said they would try to keep service in Des Moines after the SkyWest agreement ended, it was never a given, Smithey, Des Moines' aviation director, said. So it was a positive development when AirTran and Southwest announced additional service in Des Moines, he said.

Read more in Tuesday's edition of The Des Moines Register.

Tags: [AirTran Airways](#), [Des Moines International Airport](#), [Southwest Airlines](#)

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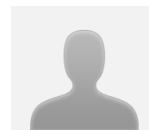
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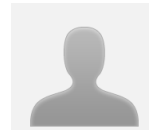
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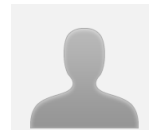
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