

Direct flights to L.A. to begin this winter

By **GREG MOORE**
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Travelers will be able to fly directly between Sun Valley and Los Angeles this winter.

Horizon Air's daily round-trip flights are expected to boost Sun Valley skier numbers and make business and vacation travel more convenient for Wood River Valley residents. The new service begins Dec. 15.

The service was jump-started by a \$600,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation to guarantee its profitability the first year. The department is providing \$20 million to 40 communities across the country as part of a program to develop rural air service.

The Blaine County Air Transportation Advisory Group, composed of representatives from all local governments, Sun Valley Co. and other local businesses, applied for the grant in April. The department announced its award June 26.

The application was prompted by a market analysis done last year by airline consultants Mead & Hunt Inc. predicting that the route should be profitable. How profitable will depend on local marketing efforts, said Mike Boggs, the company's manager of airport business services.

"This is a very doable project," he said. "I'll be surprised if much of the (grant) money is used at all if it's well marketed."

Since the creation of the Snowball Express train in Sun Valley's early days, Southern California has been one of the resort's biggest tourism markets.

"We excited about this new nonstop, direct air service from Los Angeles to Sun Valley," Wallace Huffman, Sun Valley Co. general manager, said in a press release.

"These daily flights are the first ever flights from Southern California to Sun Valley in the more than 65 years of our operations. This service will allow Sun Valley to compete with other Western ski resorts that have had direct service from this market. This will be a year-round stimulus to the economic health of the Ketchum Sun Valley community."

The new flights between the Hailey airport and Los Angeles will use 70-seat Q400 turboprop planes now in service from Seattle. Instead of returning to Seattle, the planes will continue to Los Angeles in late morning and return that same afternoon. That will result in one daily round trip to Seattle instead of the current two.

Flight time to Los Angeles will be two hours and 40 minutes. Current flights take at least four hours due to the stopover in Salt Lake City.

The grant was awarded to Hailey and Blaine County, which jointly own Friedman Memorial Airport. However, it will be used if needed to cover a guarantee in a contract made between Sun Valley Co. and Horizon Air. The contract guarantees Horizon \$11,387 per round trip up to a total of \$600,000 for the year.

Jack Sibbach, Sun Valley Co.'s marketing director, said the flights are needed to put Sun Valley on a level playing field with its major competitors, all of whom have direct flights to L.A.

"A direct, non-stop flight should stimulate the market," Sibbach said. "But I think we need it just to stay where we are. It's hard to say how much extra business it's going to give us."

Sun Valley-Ketchum Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Carol Waller said Sun Valley is one of the few major ski resorts without subsidized air travel.

Included in the Department of Transportation grant application was a commitment to marketing. Waller said the chamber is working on a \$175,000 promotion plan for ads, ski shows and direct mail to southern California.

Waller said Idaho's congressional delegation was instrumental in lobbying for the grant.

"These kinds of opportunities are what Idaho needs to increase and stabilize our rural economies," Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, stated in a press release.

Horizon is inaugurating the service with an eye on more than just tourism, however. About 30 percent of the flights are expected to originate in Sun Valley.

"There's a whole lot of residential outbound traffic," Waller said.

Current lowest fares for the route are \$398 round trip.