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EDITORIALS

AirTran pledges are the deal-maker

It's hard to overestimate the benefits to this area from finalizing the deal to attract a low-fare airline - AirTran - to Pensacola Regional Airport.

That also makes it hard to overestimate the importance of area businesses following up on pledges to the "travel bank" that undergirds the agreement.

The high cost of airline tickets has, over many years, probably been the top complaint about air service to and from Pensacola, second only to lack of access due to limited markets.

While the mantra that all flights lead to Atlanta is no longer true for Pensacola, far too many travelers still find themselves heading to other airports to find cheaper flights.

While pledges to the travel bank are coming in steadily, Pensacola Area Chamber of officials had an easier time getting the pledges than in collecting on them. That's short-sighted thinking on the part of those who haven't followed through.

Perhaps the \$150,000 pledged Thursday by Sacred Heart Hospital will set the pace for meeting the travel bank's two-year goal of \$3.4 million.

The problem for AirTran is that it knows what will happen as soon as it begins service in Pensacola: The other airlines serving the airport will drop their fares, too.

In many areas, what then happens is that passengers go with the better-known airlines rather than the newcomer. If too many do that, the discount airline could lose money and end up pulling out again.

The travel bank sets up a base level of business – and thus revenue - that the airline can count on. It then can compete for other business without having to worry that it will be run out of town by the other airlines.

That might sound anti-competitive, but it isn't. The result is that airfares do come down for everyone. That helps businesses and everyone else who flies in and out of Pensacola.

There are no guarantees about what will happen in the future. But past experience in other cities demonstrates that lower fares will result.

Can Pensacola keep AirTran once it gets here?

One reason other cities have lost discount airlines is that they did not have a travel bank to guarantee a certain amount of business. An effort is under way in Fort Walton Beach to create its own travel bank to counter the Pensacola effort.

Business owners and officials in Fort Walton clearly see the benefit of keeping AirTran at their airport. A similar recognition needs to take hold here.