

Posted on Thu, Feb. 28, 2002



Officials expected to announce new airline

The low-cost carrier would be the first fruits of Wichita's Fair Fares campaign.

**By Molly McMillin
The Wichita Eagle**

Wichita officials are expected to officially announce today that a low-cost airline will begin service at Wichita Mid-Continent Airport, sources say.

"We have been given every indication that they're set to announce the first airline," said a source who has been invited to a formal announcement today at City Hall.

Lowering the cost of air service from Wichita Mid-Continent Airport has been a top priority for the city.

The city and airport put together a program called Fair Fares to gain pledges from businesses and organizations in south-central Kansas in an effort to woo three low-cost carriers to Wichita: AirTran Airways, Frontier Airlines and American Trans Air.

Each airline would serve a different region and lower fares from 30 percent to 60 percent.

By mid-February, the campaign had received 342 pledges from area businesses totaling \$6 million. About 35 percent of the money pledged was for AirTran, and 74 percent of the pledge letters had at least some support for the airline.

Mayor Bob Knight could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Fair Fares campaign manager David Ulrich and AirTran Airways spokesman Tad Hutcherson had no comment.

Business and government leaders who have been working on efforts to attract a discount carrier to Wichita have been invited to today's announcement.

Fair Fares organizers have said that if the program is successful, the first discount carrier would begin service to Wichita as early as May.

U.S. Rep. Todd Tiahrt, R-Goddard, met with AirTran officials earlier this month to encourage them to start service in Wichita, said Chuck Knapp, a spokesman for Tiahrt.

AirTran operates a hub in Atlanta, Ga., with jet service to 37 cities, including 25 of Wichita's top 100 destinations.

AirTran is growing and has a goal to start new service in three to five cities a year. It is modernizing its fleet with Boeing 717 jets.

Experts call it a financially healthy, well-managed airline. It is rebounding from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks faster than many other airlines.

Reach Molly McMillin at 269-6708 or mmcmillin@wichitaeagle.com.