Airport officials ponder conflicting visions

By MIKE DUNNE
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On Feb. 1, officials will decide whether to hire one of two consultants who say they can increase flights and service at Metro Airport, while another consultant foresees more people flying but the airlines countering with larger, not necessarily more, airplanes.

The Greater Baton Rouge Airport Commission will have to decide which of the two conflicting visions of the future to follow.

The consultants seeking contracts to increase service say that Cress and Associates' vision of the future may be true philosophically, but in practice, more flights and airlines might be obtainable.

Cress and Associates, as part of its update of the facility's master plan, envisions demand rising dramatically in Baton Rouge between now and the year 2000.

The airport may experience "moderate increases in the number of flights but will also result in the carriers' use of higher capacity aircraft in a given market," the study says.

"Further, trends in airline service patterns are toward consolidation of services in high-density markets, leading to increased pressure on smaller markets, such as the Baton Rouge area," the study says.

"Passenger growth may be accompanied by less than proportional increases in airline operations." Such is the condition expected to prevail at Baton Rouge Metro Airport, the study says.

John Nammack of Thompson-Crenshaw said Cress has made a "fair conclusion philosophically." Moderate increases are often handled by larger aircraft, Nammack said.

But, he said, there are markets to 10 or 15 major cities from Baton Rouge that could be developed.

"There may be needs for a new aircraft heading to a new destination," he said.

What Nammack and Steve Rittvo of Urban Systems are offering is an analysis of the Baton Rouge area that can be taken to the airlines to convince them to add flights to reach higher flights and perhaps entice new airlines to serve the airport.

The consultants say they also may be able to convince the airlines to institute at Baton Rouge some of the low fares available in the higher density airport markets such as New Orleans.

Nammack cites recent successes by his company in which the low fares had been introduced and service increased -- in Bethlehem-Allentown, Pa., and Greenville-Spartanburg, S.C.

Nammack says he agrees in part with the Cress assessment and "both of us see potential for limited expansion of services." Piedmont and USAir both operate in the region and might be examples of new airlines that could be lured to Baton Rouge.

"The bottom line is, no airline will stay in a community if there are no profits. If it sees greener pastures, it goes," Nammack said.

Baton Rouge is losing a lot of passengers to New Orleans, Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth and Shreveport, Nammack said.

"We need to show them it is in their own self-interest to cut these fares and retain service," Nammack said.

"Baton Rouge is underserved to several cities," Nammack's preliminary study shows. He cites such cities as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Atlanta.

"Baton Rouge is a big enough market to deserve better service," Nammack said.

"In the market study process, he said, it is possible to see if new, low-fare airlines are "logically fit for another airline." Piedmont and USAir both operate in the region and might be examples of new airlines that could be lured to Baton Rouge.

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He said he doesn't see Baton Rouge becoming a "hub city.""A large part of the Baton Rouge market is going to New Orleans to take advantage of more varied flight schedules and lower fares, and perhaps better flight schedules and lower fares can be obtained in Baton Rouge," he said.

"The idea of air service improvements is not only additional service," Rittvo said.

Where the two consultants diverge is in getting better service and lower fares. Rittvo's firm, which has done most of the transportation planning for the 1984 New Orleans World's Fair, said he is basing his assumptions in part on the research he has done for the World's Fair.

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