More air travelers choosing Lafayette

By Jennifer Smith

More passengers are flying into and out of Lafayette Regional Airport this year than at the same time last year, and if the trend continues 1994 will be the best year in the airport’s history.

Gregory Roberts, director of aviation at the airport, said 125,639 people have flown out of the airport and 125,529 passengers have flown into the airport this year.

“If the rest of this year is the same as November and December of last year, we should have about 150,000 people having used the airport in 1994,” Roberts said.

But Roberts said each month so far this year has exceeded the following month in the number of passengers flying through the Lafayette Airport. Because of this, Roberts said he anticipates the airport will probably have even more than the expected 150,000 passengers this year.

Roberts said the increase is an indication that the economy of Lafayette is improving.

“I think people are starting to realize the conveniences of flying out of Lafayette,” Roberts said.

Roberts said he started to see an increased use of the airport when Continental Airlines last year reduced its fares to Houston. For some flights, it was an almost 50 percent price reduction, he said.

“In the past it was cheaper to drive,” Roberts said.

Roberts also attributed the increase to more people using their disposable income to fly and to more people using the airport when they attend conferences in Lafayette.

Even though more people are using the airport than ever before in its 64-year history, many air passengers still choose to drive to the Baton Rouge or New Orleans airports when they fly.

Roberts said this has a negative effect on the Lafayette Airport in a number of ways. Not only does Lafayette lose business to these cities, it also hurts the airport’s chance of regaining commercial air service.

Earlier this year, Continental Airlines pulled its jet service from Lafayette.

Although Roberts said many local air passengers continue to use Lafayette’s other airplanes, many still perceive smaller planes as less safe than commercial flights.

But Roberts said last month’s crash of an American Eagle plane, which was not the same type model plane that flies out of Lafayette, has not affected business at the Lafayette Airport.

“The flying public realizes it was just an unfortunate set of circumstances,” Roberts said.

In order to return jet service to Lafayette, Roberts said airline officials must see a need in Lafayette.

Curt Hoglan, president of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority, agreed that the key to returning jet service to Lafayette is for local residents to use the Lafayette Airport now.

“You have to demonstrate by actual emplanements and deplanements that you’ve got the business,” Hoglan said. “You can’t say bring the jet service and we’ll fill it.”

Hoglan said jet service will also increase the likelihood of businesses locating in Lafayette.