More airport services help economy

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Editor's note: These stories conclude a four-part series about how transportation in Lafayette can be improved.

When Lafayette Regional Airport (LRA) began offering three daily flights to Atlanta in December, airport officials hoped other airlines would notice and bring their services to Acadiana. Continental Airlines did just that by offering two daily jet service flights to Houston, according to LRA officials. The flights are scheduled to start June 6.

"I'm optimistic we'll see more regional jets come into Lafayette Regional Airport in the not too distant future," said Greg Roberts, director of aviation for LRA.

The key is convincing the airlines that they'll make money here, he said.

"As more people fly, airlines see that and come to pack it up," he explained.

And if more airlines fly into and out of LRA, more people will take those flights, instead of driving to neighboring airports, such as New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Lake Charles.

At the same time, airports promote economic growth by encouraging businesses to locate near them.

Businesses tend to locate near airports so they can transport and receive goods and supplies, Roberts explained. And that means more jobs, he added.

In addition, airports bring in people who spend money in the community, he said.

LRA's economic impact on the local community in 1995, with an average of 1,645 people going through the airport terminal a day, was $320 million, Roberts said.

The Lafayette Economic Development Authority (LEDA) recognized this potential when it forged an agreement with the Lafayette Airport Commission in March to use airport property to attract new businesses to the area, according to Roberts.

"The airport is the barometer of the economy," said Donnie Dugal, an airport commissioner.

He explained airport growth goes hand in hand with other economic developments in the city, such as a convention center being built near the Cajundome.

"Lafayette is a prime area for conventions," he said. "We've lost a lot of flights and business because the planes were too small to carry everyone."

But Roberts said the recent addition of services at LRA should attract larger airplanes capable of carrying more passengers, including large groups of visitors for conventions, athletic events and other tourist attractions.

However, for a regional airport to succeed, passengers have to use the services, he added.

"Every time you board a plane in Lafayette, that's money in the pockets of the community," Dugal said.

But even though enplanement figures, which measure how many people board planes in a month, have been increasing over the past few years,

"The 1995 enplanement figure for LRA was 151,000, he said. The projection for 2000 is 176,100 people and an estimate for 2010 is 222,500 people.

However, there is still a significant number of Acadiana residents who fly out of the Greater Baton Rouge Regional Airport and New Orleans International Airport, according to Roberts.

He said LRA needs to recapture, for several reasons, the 33,600 Acadiana residents who flew out of the Baton Rouge airport last year, as well as residents who flew out of other nearby airports.

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But Congress failed to renew an aviation user-tax, known as a ticket tax, when it lapsed in December. Therefore, airlines no longer have the authority to collect the taxes, which are used for airport construction and traffic control services, Roberts explained.

If Congress does not pass a Truth in Budgeting bill, which is scheduled to be voted on April 15, no entitlement funds will be left for airports by the end of this September, he added.

Roberts said "time and money" have always been LRA's biggest obstacles.

Despite these hurdles, Roberts and Dugal said LRA provides "very good service" for a community the size of Lafayette. That service includes 23 daily flights to destinations such as Dallas, Houston, Memphis and Atlanta.

"Lafayette is blessed with awefully good air service right now," Roberts said.

And the airport will continue to make improvements, such as establishing a flight to New Orleans, to stimulate its own growth, as well as the area's development, Dugal said.

"The better the service you get for the community, the better it will all around," he said.