

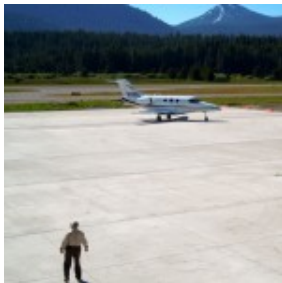
Airline owner wants to put Lake Tahoe back on flight map

By Kathryn Reed

In less than a year, commercial air service is planned for Lake Tahoe Airport.

Mike Zeid, who runs Tahoe Air Express, resumed business operations at the South Lake Tahoe airport Friday with the first charter flight arriving about 9am. He is in the process of filling out the paperwork for the FAA and National Transportation Safety Board to be certified to carry more than the current limit of nine passengers. The airport also must work with the feds to make this a reality.

Zeid wants 30-seat planes to fly to the South Shore.



Mike Zeid directs his pilot July 1 where to stop on the tarmac at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

This airport once had commercial service and Zeid was involved then. In the 1970s he operated Ram Airlines, which had flights

in and out of South Lake Tahoe.

His business is based in Henderson, where many of the flights are scenic tours to the Grand Canyon out of McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas.

City Manager Tony O'Rourke wants to see how Zeid's service works, saying, if they can't fill a plane with nine seats, a larger plane has little chance for success.

The Beechcraft Premier that landed July 1 on the inaugural flight is sleek and quiet. The six-seater has plenty of legroom. Cargo space is ample for skis and golf clubs.

The glass cockpit is mostly digital, with few gauges that most people would be accustomed to seeing.

New, this plane would cost about \$6 million.

In the fleet are two prop jets that seat nine people, with two more coming. Zeid said, "We'll add as we go."

What needs to be done

"Once they get the certificate upgraded and we bring in 30 passengers, they will redo the terminal building and have space for us," Zeid told *Lake Tahoe News*.

At that time the planes will access the main terminal, which today is mostly used as a pseudo city hall. For now, the charter customers will use the fixed base operations that everyone else uses.

"Before we seriously discuss commercial flights we need improvements (at the airport)," O'Rourke said.

Reinstalling the baggage carousel and ticket counter space are two things on the to-do list.

"If they wanted their passengers to connect to another flight, then we would start looking at other screening and TSA,"

airport Director Sherry Miller said.

Zeid is talking about having packages for Europeans who would fly into Las Vegas or San Francisco and then be flown to Tahoe via his airline.

Economic factors

O'Rourke has been talking to Stateline gaming interests, who have lost a large share of travelers who can't fly here directly, to gauge their desire in having the city bring in air service. He said they are completely behind this endeavor.

The city is already making money off Tahoe Air Express. The plane had to pay a landing fee and then the fuel truck came over.

Once people are here, they inevitably have to spend money. Airplanes also gets people off the roads – which on a weekend like this when the South Shore population is likely to swell to 100,000, is a good thing not only for the environmental, but people's mental health.

For now, Zeid will fly essentially anywhere as a charter. Price is dependent on how many people are on the plane.

Once scheduled flights are in place, he expects to fly between Tahoe and John Wayne Airport in Newport Beach, Hollywood/Burbank, and one or more of the three main Bay Area airports.

Having lived here before, Zeid knows how economically depressed the area is. He believes providing an easier way for people to get here is one way of generating income for the town. He plans to provide a discount to locals who want to get out of town for a bit.

Gary Air has been providing charter service since last fall via a smaller aircraft. Trish and Dave Guerrieri had their plane on the tarmac as well Friday. Trish Guerrieri said they

have a good working relationship with Zeid and that they are not in direct competition.

Airport Director Miller said about 90 percent of the calls she receives are people in the San Jose area looking for a way to fly to South Lake Tahoe.

Michael Golden, who runs the fixed based operation Mountain West Aviation, said he gets calls weekly if not daily from people in Southern California wanting to fly to South Tahoe.

"I know they will be successful," Golden said of Tahoe Air Express.

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