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Direct Air Expects Lakeland Linder to Become a Hub of Tourism

By [John Chambliss](#)

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LAKELAND | Officials from Direct Air said Wednesday they think Lakeland Linder Regional Airport can become a hub of tourism for visitors to Central Florida and its many attractions.



They described Lakeland as a "gateway to Florida" and said they have high hopes for the airport.

The Myrtle Beach airline is betting that people from Central Illinois, upper New York, the Washington D.C. area and South Carolina will fly to Lakeland Linder because of low prices and convenience.

Kay Ellison, a managing partner with Direct Air, said Lakeland has much to offer with its proximity to Tampa and Orlando.

"It's the perfect demographics for passengers who want nonstop connections," Ellison said.

Gene Conrad, director at Lakeland Linder, said Niagara Falls, N.Y.; Hagerstown, Md.; Springfield, Ill.; and Myrtle Beach, S.C., don't offer service to Central Florida.

He praised Direct Air.

"No one else has given us a chance," Conrad said.

Direct Air currently flies from 16 cities, including Melbourne, Fort Myers, Sanford and West Palm Beach.

"People are tired of going into Sanford," Ellison said. "It is crowded and difficult."

But Sanford is often cheaper and more convenient for passengers to fly in and out of than Orlando International Airport.

That's a goal for Lakeland Linder.

Standing in front of a Direct Air 737-400 at Lakeland Linder, airline officials announced the schedule beginning June 23.

The first flight from Lakeland will leave at 8 a.m. to Myrtle Beach. That plane will then leave for Hagerstown.

But there were a few kinks on the Direct Air website.

Right now, it describes Lakeland Linder as Tampa/Lakeland. Once you buy a ticket, the website describes the Lakeland airport as West Orlando/Lakeland.

Flights to Niagara Falls and Springfield will leave three times a week on Friday, Saturday and Monday.

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A second flight to Myrtle Beach and Hagerstown will leave on Thursday and Sunday.

In all, there will be eight weekly departures.

The Hagerstown flight from Lakeland will initially have a layover in Myrtle Beach, but Ellison said she expects that it will be nonstop in several months.

Conrad said Lakeland Linder isn't going to be the next Sanford, but is looking for its specific niche.

In 1995, Sanford had 48,000 passengers in one year.

In 2010, Sanford, a city of 51,000, had 1.8 million passengers. The airport has relied on passengers using cheaper airlines and parking to fly to and from Sanford instead of Orlando International Airport.

Diane Crews, vice president at the airport, said they expect even more passengers this year with Vision Airlines joining Allegiant Airlines and Direct Air as low cost carriers.

More traffic from Lakeland Linder means more money for it.

Lakeland Linder will receive \$1 million for infrastructure projects from the Federal Aviation Administration if 10,000 people leave the airport this year.

Last year, it received only \$150,000.

City and county officials said Wednesday the airline will bring millions of dollars and hundreds of jobs to the county.

Conrad said the immediate impact will be about 100 jobs. Jobs in Transportation Security Administration, ticket services, car rental companies and concessions will need to be filled. He said taxi and shuttle services will also benefit from the airline.

Mark Jackson, director of tourism and sports marketing, said the flights could bring new businesses and conferences to the area.

He said Geico, which has offices in Lakeland, employs 1,700 people in Buffalo near Niagara Falls. Rich Products, a frozen foods supplier to Publix Super Markets Inc., employs 1,300 people in Buffalo.

Jackson said there are a total of 10 million people within a 100-mile radius of the four cities. Many of those people, he said, have families who will come to Legoland in Winter Haven when it opens in October.

Direct Air has a contract with Sky King to use its airplanes and pilots for the daily flights.

Sky King, based in California, is currently under Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization but plans to come out by June, its spokesman, Tom Johnson, said.

It's not the first time a commercial carrier has flown from Lakeland.

In 1987, COMAIR Inc. began a shuttle service to Orlando International Airport. The operation folded after about three months because of a lack of traffic and technical problems. In the late 1970s, several airlines flew out of Lakeland, but they also folded because of poor patronage.

City officials have worked on bringing a daily carrier to Lakeland for months.

On Jan. 3, city commissioners approved the \$700,000 construction of a new fixed-based operator facility.

A baggage claim, ticketing and security for Transportation Security Administration officials will be located in the previous fixed-based operator facility.

A \$2 million grant from the Florida Department of Transportation paid for the expansion.

[John Chambliss can be reached at john.chambliss@theledger.com or 863-802-7588.]