

California-Based Charter Jet Firm 'Sky King' Heads To Lakeland

The service aims to bring its fleet of 737s, at least 50 new jobs to area.

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LAKELAND | Sky King, a California-based charter jet service with a fleet of 737s, is about to land at Lakeland Linder Regional Airport.

City commissioners on Monday are scheduled to approve a 10-year lease for the company to move here. Gregg Lukenbill, the company's owner, said he wants Sky King operating in Lakeland by June 1.

The company brings about 130 jobs to Lakeland with at least 50 being new hires, depending on how many California employees move here.

The move is prompted by business shifting from the western states to east of the Mississippi River in the past several years, Lukenbill said.

The company is under Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization. Lukenbill said Sky King was big into flying professional sports teams around the country to play games and was badly damaged by the National Hockey League's full-season lockout in 2004-2005.

The business of charter jet service nationwide "has been a roller coaster" for the past several years, but Sky King is reacting well to reorganization, Lukenbill said.

The move won't immediately produce flights from Lakeland, but that's the plan, Lukenbill said.

He said Lakeland strikes him as the kind of city where "people say it's a great place to live, but I wouldn't want to visit there.

"I want to change that."

Sky King now flies charter jets from Miami to Cuba. Lukenbill said that on Friday, there were six round trips.

He said the company also flies round-trip charters from St. Petersburg and Sanford to Atlantic City and books charters for business and sporting events. He has grand plans for what he said is an ideal location between all of the attractions in Tampa and Orlando, plus Legoland.

The city will spend \$250,000 on modifications for 44,000 square feet of hangar and office space for the company.

The lease calls for Sky King to pay the city \$5,000 per month for the first year, \$7,333 per month for years two through five and \$9,166 per month after that.

If Sky King hasn't established a passenger service in five years, "the city may trigger a renegotiation of terms and conditions of the lease," the lease reads.

The hope is that Sky King "will attract more aviation-related business," said Steve Scruggs, the executive director of the Lakeland Economic Development Council, and establish a charter service in Lakeland, Deputy City Manager Tony Delgado said.

"The totality of this deal is massive," said Gene Conrad, airport manager.

Conrad said the airport receives \$150,000 in federal money per year as a general aviation "reliever" of traffic at the Tampa and Orlando international airports. He said if the Lakeland airport had a service that booked departing flights for 10,000 people in a year, that \$150,000 could be \$1 million.

The Sacramento Business Journal reported in March that Sky King has 308 creditors and \$10 million to \$50 million in both assets and liabilities, according to the voluntary petition filed in U.S. Bankruptcy Court.

Lukenbill said the company searched several states for a new location, including Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi and North Carolina.

Lukenbill is the former managing partner of the Sacramento Kings in the National Basketball Association.

He said he started out in the airplane business by buying a plane for the Kings and named the company Sky King after the team and the 1950s television show.

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