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## Interactive Issue

# New airport director working to see traffic take off

Print

March 09, 2014 10:00 am • By Jim Offner

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WATERLOO | Mike Wilson wants Waterloo to fly with the bigger airports.

Never mind that the airlines have shown a distinct predilection over the last 20 years or so toward using bigger facilities in the name of cost efficiencies.

Wilson, the new director of Waterloo Regional Airport, said the local airfield can get a bigger slice of the commercial travel business.

The local airport has all the right ingredients in place to make such a move, said Wilson, who started his new job Feb. 18.

"The facility is beautiful, the terminal is very nice," said Wilson, 33, who came to Waterloo after three years as director of Aberdeen Regional Airport in South Dakota.

Wilson was hired to replace Brad Hagen, who left the post in summer 2013 after an 11-year stint to become the supervisor of airport projects and operations at Mesa Falcon Field Airport, a larger airfield in the Phoenix area.

For several months after Hagen's departure, the airport was run on an interim basis by Austin,

Up in the air: Waterloo Airport under interim management



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Airport director takes new job



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Perhaps Waterloo's biggest ticket to more traffic is its runway, Wilson said.

"We have a the longest runway in the state, which is a huge asset," he said, noting that the 150-foot-wide runway can accommodate larger aircraft than the 50-seat jets that jump in and out of Waterloo twice a day.

He said Allegiant Air, for example, could be interested in a facility like Waterloo.

"The 150-foot-wide runway is typically something Allegiant looks at," he said. "It really helps in trying to attract airlines."

Currently, American Airlines services Waterloo Regional with twice-daily connections to and from Chicago O'Hare International Airport.

Wilson said he's looking into more flights with American.

"Now, I'm trying to work with American and see what we can do to increase service with them," Wilson said.

In 2013, the local airport had 20,957 passengers embarking from Waterloo and 21,613 travelers arriving.

Wilson said those numbers are considerably lower than they should be. He said it's not unreasonable to expect a passenger count approaching 60,000 in and out.

"This metro area has about 180,000 people. the community I was in had a metro area of about 36,000, and we were running about 20,000 passengers," he said.

Waterloo Mayor Buck Clark, part of the search committee that hired Wilson, said he liked the energy he saw.

"I know we did a pretty thorough search and came down to two qualified candidates," Clark said. "I had the opportunity to speak with both of them and I much preferred Mike over the other candidate. With just a week under his belt with Waterloo, I'm convinced we made a good choice. He has hit the ground running, seems very knowledgeable and is anxious to get to work on some projects he thinks will make a positive impact in Waterloo."

Wilson said the potential of Waterloo's airport, and its location in the Federal Aviation Administration's Central Region, drew him to the position.

"This region helps airports a little more, especially when it comes to being self-sufficient," said Wilson, who had been in the FAA's Great Lakes Region in his last job. "This airport does not take a tax subsidy. A lot of (revenue) comes from the cropland around it."

The cropland Waterloo Regional leases generates about \$350,000 a year, Wilson said.

Prior to running Aberdeen's airport, Wilson, who earned a bachelor's degree in aviation management at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, managed the airport in Brookings, S.D., for 3 1/2 years.

Wilson said he is convinced Waterloo Regional Airport can compete strongly for traffic against regional rivals in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines, and he said he plans an aggressive marketing campaign for the local facility.

"I did a similar campaign in Aberdeen, and our emplanements went up about 25-30 percent," Wilson said.

The campaign involved radio ads as well as a billboard set up near a competing airport.



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The airline serving Aberdeen added a third daily flight, and that's a goal in Waterloo, Wilson said. There may be some opportunities to add flights, at least during peak travel months.

"I talked to American, and they said they were looking at adding capacity last year, but that was pushed back due to the merger" with US Airways, Wilson said. "Hopefully we can get some additional flights."

A daily schedule of only two flights in and out is not enough, Wilson said.

"Two flights a day are difficult, especially for business travelers, to make connections," he said.

"Ideally, I'd like to see a midday flight to the mix."

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**Tags** Waterloo Regional Airport, American Airlines, Aberdeen Regional Airport, Allegiant Air, Federal Aviation Administration, Brad Hagen, Mesa Falcon Field Airport, Chicago O'hare International Airport, Buck Clark, St. Cloud State University, Us Airways, Mike Wilson, Airport Director

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