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AIRPORT

Up in the air: Waterloo Airport under interim management

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Rick Chase

The first American Eagle flight pulls into Waterloo Regional Airport Tuesday, April 4, 2012. The airport now is under temporary management of Austin, Texas-based Trillion Aviation until a new permanent director is hired. (Courier File Photo)

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July 14, 2013 9:00 am • By JIM OFFNER, jim.offner@wfcourier.com (0) Comments

WATERLOO, Iowa — Waterloo Regional Airport isn't exactly on autopilot, but the gateway to the Cedar Valley is certainly in transition.

The facility lost 11-year manager Brad Hagen recently when he took a job in Arizona. Until a replacement is hired, Austin, Texas-based Trillion Aviation has taken the helm.

The City Council approved Trillion's temporary management of the airport by a 7-0 vote July 1.

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"We've been working with them for quite a while as consultant to airport matters," Waterloo Mayor Buck Clark said.

The city was beginning its search for a new airport manager when Trillion Vice President Mike Bown suggested his company take control of the facility until a permanent replacement for Hagen was found, Clark said.

Bown suggested Steve Wareham, who had recently joined Trillion after having directed Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport for nine years.

"That was very intriguing to me," Clark said. "This guy has got incredible credentials for airport management, so we thought it might be a pretty good idea."

Trillion doesn't have a daily presence at the airport. Wareham, Bown or another representative of the company is there at least one day per week. The company also is available to staff the facility on an as-needed basis.

"We wanted a management representative on the ground at least one day a week and whenever needed and to help us market the airport and lead the economic development efforts at the airport, and they've agreed to do that," Clark said.

The right candidate

The city benefits because it can spend the time to find the right person to fill the job permanently, Clark said.

Nobody knows how long the search will take. Clark guesses about four to six months.

"According to our advisers at Trillion, there's a whole bunch of folks reaching that (retirement) age, and there are a lot of airports looking. It's going to be a pretty competitive market, so it may take a while," Clark said.

Replacing Hagen won't be an easy task, said Dee Vandeventer, chairperson of the airport's board of directors. She cited the more than \$30 million in capital improvements at the airport during Hagen's tenure.

"The board is looking for a director to fill some pretty big shoes," Vandeventer said. "Our new director has to have the skills to manage large grants and capital projects but also be the face for the airport. We'd like to see him or her out sharing the airport story with the business community and community at large."

There are two flights in and out of the airport each day, and the hope is to add to that.

"We are so close to getting a third daily flight; all it will take is a few more filled seats each flight," Vandeventer said. "We see the new director playing a major role in increasing air service to the Cedar Valley."

Wareham said the airport has been well run, which should make his job easier.

"It's a beautiful terminal building, been well maintained. The runway is in good condition. There are good relationships with the airlines," he said. "I'm coming aboard a moving train, and it's moving in the right direction."

Looking for ideas

Trillion wants to bring ideas that will lead to growth in order to give the next full-time director a head start, Wareham said. Doing so in absentia isn't as much a challenge today as it would have been in years past.

"Twenty years ago, this would be a hard thing to do. Today, with Internet and texting, you're just



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never far away from a communication link, so I'll be available seven days a week," Wareham said.

Bown is looking for potential funding to make Waterloo more competitive with other airports in the region, such as Cedar Rapids, the Quad Cities and Des Moines.

"In terms of air service, it's a very challenging endeavor," Bown said.

Waterloo is an Essential Air Service facility and receives federal subsidies for service from its current airline, American Eagle.

The hope is to build air service beyond EAS status, Bown said. He cited Manhattan, Kan., as a city that has done so successfully.

Eagle officials would like to see the Waterloo facility marketed more aggressively, and that will happen, Bown said.

"We're hoping to help them leverage their position, and it would help if we could get a grant," he said.

Tags Mike Bown, Trillion Aviation Llc, Steve Wareham, Brad Hagen, Buck Clark, Dee Vandeventer, Waterloo Regional Airport, Temporary Management, Waterloo Mayor, Airport Manager, Minneapolis-st. Paul International Airport, Waterloo Iowa, Essential Air Service, American Eagle, Cedar Valley, Cedar Rapids Iowa

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