

## Daily News (Bowling Green, KY)

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### **Official: Airlines intrigued with BG Recent experience of Somerset seen as barometer of potential for commuter service here as airport fields interest from firms**

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As Bowling Green eyes the potential for commuter air service, the city's main plane man says there are a number of interested airlines. And if what has happened in Somerset is applicable here, air service in Bowling Green is a real possibility.

"This is something we worked to get for years," said Ron Swartz, manager for the Cumberland Regional Airport. Since January, the airport has offered service to Cincinnati provided by Locair, which next month will open up flights to Washington, D.C., and Nashville.

Swartz said the community worked hard to make improvements to its airport, which has a 5,800-foot-long runway, and to obtain approval for a two-year Air Essential Air Service grant that helps provide a fare subsidy to the airline.

Somerset received a grant of about \$1 million to help get the service running, according to news reports. The subsidy puts the fare to Cincinnati at \$39; trips to Washington will be \$99 each way, Swartz said.

Bowling Green wouldn't be eligible for an EAS grant, but does plan to apply for another Small Community Development grant that would provide a certain level of funding, according to Rob Barnett, manager of Bowling Green-Warren County Regional Airport.

Locair General Manager Nate Vallier said his company is interested in the Bowling Green market, but only if some kind of subsidy is offered while the service gets established.

The chamber of **commerce** in Somerset helped figure out the potential markets for the airlines, which convinced Locair to open the Washington flights – even before the beginning of June, those have expanded from a planned two flights a week to four, Vallier said.

Barnett said he feels Bowling Green's markets have been defined through a study now being conducted, and Vallier said the airline would probably also need help in marketing its service if it were to come here.

"But Bowling Green presents a challenge because it is so close to Nashville," he said. "We would want to make sure we would have enough traffic."

Locair already has the infrastructure in Kentucky, "so we may as well grow," Vallier said. "I do think there is potential in Bowling Green."

His company also is looking at Owensboro and Paducah and could potentially link several Kentucky cities. But for now, Locair is only using a 19-seat plane modified to carry nine passengers, giving passengers three feet of leg room.

“As the market grows, we could add a 30- to 50-seat turbo prop plane,” Vallier said.

Companies like his need to be flexible, he said to change as the market does. For instance, the company’s Florida plane now makes trips to the Bahamas, but that could change if the Cuba travel market opens up.

Barnett said the plane size that Locair is using is smaller than Bowling Green supporters had hoped for. But Locair is not the only company that has shown interest: those other companies have not yet been identified, however, Locair’s interest was suggested by Vallier and confirmed by Barnett.

“We just traded information a few days ago,” Barnett said. “Locair is one of about five or six companies we are talking to. The grant that we received is really paying dividends (in terms of market information the airport can provide).”

Barnett said that just as Locair is cautiously evaluating new markets, Bowling Green will have to evaluate potential airlines and see which business model best fits Bowling Green. Participants on both sides want to see if a financial commitment, and at what level, is justified, he said.

“I don’t know how quickly this is going to happen, but our phone is ringing more frequently with airline representatives asking questions,” he said.

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