



Tuesday, November 04, 2008

## PENDLETON

# Airline CEO lays out plans for growth

By **PHIL WRIGHT**

The East Oregonian

Tuesday, November 04, 2008

"It's about Portland."

That's the message from Kent Craford, the top executive of SeaPort Airlines, who was in Pendleton yesterday making a pitch for the upstart company. SeaPort edged out Horizon for service out of the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport.

Speaking to the Pendleton Rotary Club and later to assorted other groups, Craford continued to focus on the idea that this market is about connecting to and from Portland.

Craford is the 32-year-old chief executive officer of SeaPort Airlines, which recently underbid Horizon Air for the U.S. Department of Transportation's essential air service subsidy that compensates airlines flying in small, rural markets. The federal government will pay SeaPort nearly \$1.57 million for the first year of its contract and \$1.6 million for the second year for direct flights between Pendleton and Portland.

Horizon wanted a \$3.2 million subsidy to fly 76-seat planes twice a day between Pendleton and Portland.

"Capacity doesn't grow markets," Craford said in a shot at Horizon Air. "Flying one choice at 2:45 in the afternoon - that doesn't work."

SeaPort flies about 20 times a day between Portland and Seattle and also owns Wings of Alaska, a charter service based in Juneau, Alaska. SeaPort employs about 25 people in Seattle and Portland and another 70 in Alaska. Starting Dec. 2, SeaPort will fly direct three times a day between Portland and Pendleton.

Craford said the number of people getting on commercial airplanes in Pendleton has dropped 50 percent in eight years. Rather than fly, those people began driving Interstate 84. Growing the market will mean getting those people to fly again.

Doing that will mean providing a schedule and options that fit local needs, Craford said, as well as hammering home the message that SeaPort can get people from Pendleton to Portland in half the time it takes to drive.

Craford also said while he understands the appeal of a larger plane, SeaPort's Swiss-built Pilatus PC-12 nine-seat single turboprops are what top executives and movie stars fly.

"All I ask is that you try it once - because it will be the greatest thing you'll try in commercial air travel," Craford said.

The planes, however, lack a restroom and there is no flight attendant. And because the planes are small, weight matters. SeaPort limits customers to two, 35-pound bags, and the airline will ask passengers how much they weigh. SeaPort seats customers to best balance the planes, and SeaPort won't fly anyone weighing 400 pounds or more.

SeaPort requires customers to show up just 15 minutes before a flight. SeaPort is small enough, Craford said, that it falls below the radar of the Transportation Security Administration, the government agency responsible for larger airline security inspections. SeaPort passengers in Pendleton won't have to go through much security screening, but they go through the TSA if they connect to other flights out of Portland.

SeaPort operates a terminal about 250 yards away from the main terminal at Portland International Airport, and the airline will provide shuttle service to the main terminal.

SeaPort also will sell tickets in a promotional offer for \$75 one way, Craford said. Those tickets will be available through travel Web sites such as Expedia.com and through SeaPort's own Web site.

Craford said SeaPort's long-term goal is sustainability because there is real political pressure to kill the federal government's essential air service subsidy.

SeaPort's three flights a day means it can carry a maximum of 27 customers daily. Horizon flies about 20 passengers a day now, so there is a little room for growth.

But Craford said bumping against capacity is just the kind of problem SeaPort wants in Pendleton.

"With nine passenger planes," says Craford, "people in this area are in control of how many flights we could potentially add to the schedule."

## Related Links