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SeaPort Airlines Swoops in for Sales Pitch in Tupelo

The U.S. Department of Transportation is expected to make a decision within the next week as to which of two competing airlines to award a federal subsidy grant in order to operate at Tupelo Regional Airport.

And one of those airlines made a sales pitch on Saturday.

Portland Oregon based SeaPort Airlines has been in business since 1982 and has the mission of providing air service from rural communities to major hubs.

It has requested approximately one-million dollars a year in subsidies from the U.S. Department of Transportation to operate in Tupelo. Saturday, the airline gave rides to city officials, including a trip to Memphis to see the carrier's hub.

"We believe that we're the right size for Tupelo.," said SeaPort CEO Rob McKinney. "We can offer better frequency, lower fares and more stable route structure than what's being currently served," he added. "We're offering seven round trips a day, four to Memphis and three to Atlanta. So we believe that we're going to be Tupelo's hometown airline for a long time to come," McKinney concluded.

After taking the flight to Memphis, at least two council members say they were impressed with what they saw. Mike Bryan said it was a nice flight. "I think they would be a good fit for Tupelo with the smaller plane and their customer service oriented style," he said. "And I think it would be nice for Tupelo and us to take a look at," Bryan added.

"With the economy like it is, it's a good service to offer three to four flights a day," said councilman Willie Jennings. "And that's what a lot of people are looking for, is more flights, economic flights and good service," he said.

But at least one city council member is concerned that at least right now, passengers using SeaPort as a connecting flight to some place beyond Memphis or Atlanta will have to pick up their bags in one of those cities and re-check them to their connecting flight. Currently, Mesaba, which operates the Delta connection, allows you to check your bags in Tupelo through to your final destination.

On Monday the Tupelo Airport board is expected to recommend to the U.S. Department of Transportation which carrier it prefers. And some city council members plan to give the board their input.

Officials say that Mesaba, the current carrier serving Tupelo, has submitted a request to continue operating in Tupelo.

The decision on the grant request is expected by December 24th.

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