

Study: Quarter of area fliers use Gainesville airport

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Gainesville Regional Airport officials knew they served an average of 507 passengers a day. But the unknown was how many area fliers instead were choosing Jacksonville, Orlando and other airports.

That total is 1,511, according to a study just wrapped up by Sixel Consulting, meaning about 25 percent of the area's 2,018 daily fliers go with the Gainesville airport.

The study "provides a true picture of what our market potential is," airport spokeswoman Laura Aguiar said. "The airlines know we get those 500 passengers a day, but what they don't know is that there are another 1,500 out there for us to capture."

The \$15,000 study used airline ticket purchases from July 2012 to June 2013 to establish a "catchment area," which is where those 2,018 fliers live. That area runs from Suwannee and Columbia counties to the north and halfway through Marion County to the south.

Because nonstop routes are a lure for fliers, Aguiar said it's important for Gainesville to show airlines that establishing more nonstop routes would be profitable by attracting some of the 1,511 fliers choosing other airports.

American Airlines' direct flight to Miami is the Gainesville airport's busiest, with 20,509 passengers annually. Meanwhile, the study found, Gainesville is losing the most passengers to the Washington-Baltimore area, followed by New York-Newark, then Chicago.

"It's kind of our ammunition, so when we go to another airline and say, 'We're capturing 24 passengers a day (through indirect flights) to Washington D.C., but there are another 145 out there to grab if we have direct service,'" Aguiar said.

This type of study was last done in 2008 by Boyd Research. It found Gainesville was capturing only 15 percent of area fliers, but Aguiar said that study was "a little more generous" in the size of the catchment area.

Preliminary figures show about 200,000 passengers in 2013 for Gainesville, up from the 195,154 in 2012. The climb in the past 10 years has been 55 percent, Aguiar said.

Aguiar attributed the rise in passengers, at least recently, to several factors: the 2010 addition of the direct Miami flight; the resulting Small Community Air Service Development grant to market that route, which totaled \$214,000 with local matches



Erica Brough/The Gainesville Sun
 American Eagle passengers wait in line for their tickets from the Gainesville Regional Airport to Miami in Gainesville, Fla., Dec. 10, 2010.

added in; Gainesville's Silver Airways addition in 2012; and the economic recovery since 2008, which allowed for business growth and innovation in the area.

"We benefit from that," Aguiar said. "We're a direct reflection of the business community."

Sixel Consulting will be presenting their findings to the airport authority Thursday at 4 p.m. at the airport.

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