

CAA in the News:



Officials consider return of regular air service at Groton airport

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By Lee Howard

Groton — Passenger air service could be returning to [Groton-New London Airport](#) more than a decade after the departure of US Airways Express left the region without a regular air carrier.

Kevin A. Dillon, executive director and chief executive of the [Connecticut Airport Authority](#), said Wednesday he will be in southeastern Connecticut this week to speak with key business leaders about their air travel needs.

Most businesses have moved air travel to T.F. Green Airport in Warwick, R.I., or Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks since local service here ceased in September 2003.

The meeting this Friday, arranged by the [Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut](#), will be geared toward determining the size of travel budgets at local businesses to determine whether the region can support regular passenger service, Dillon said.

The meeting will not be open to the public, he said, because businesses will be providing proprietary information.

"We do need the commitment of the business community to bring this service," Dillon said in a phone interview. "The Connecticut Airport Authority has set a goal to re-establish commercial service at Groton-New London Airport."

If business leaders are encouraging, he added, the airport authority would approach airlines about re-establishing regular service to the region. When service would be established has yet to be determined.

Tony Sheridan, president of the local chamber, deferred comment on the airport proposal to Dillon when contacted Wednesday.

But in an email he sent out to members of the business community, Sheridan appeared to back the plan, saying regular air service "would be a great boom to the region and beyond."

Noting that Groton-New London has physical limitations — two small runways measuring 4,000 and 5,000 feet in length — Dillon said the airport would not support long-haul service.

But he said flights by small aircraft, including turboprops, with the capacity of 100 passengers or fewer, heading to airports in Philadelphia and Washington, would be appropriate.

"Washington, especially, has a lot of synergies with Electric Boat and the Coast Guard Academy," he said. "What we're looking at is either smaller regional airlines or one of the major carriers using affiliates."

Small airlines looking to take people to Cape Cod or some of the surrounding islands also would be considered, Dillon said.

He added that the airport authority might agree to passenger service as little as once a week, but said he believed the region would wind up with more regular flights.

"I like to think the demand is a lot stronger," he said.

More than 20 years ago, the airport was served by Pilgrim Airlines. But in the era of airline deregulation that began more than 35 years ago, many regional airports suffered as airlines shut down less profitable routes.

According to a [Groton-New London Master Plan Update two years ago](#), annual commercial airport flights locally that totaled more than 14,000 25 years ago had dwindled to less than 2,500 by 2005. Commercial operations include servicing, maintaining, repairing, renting or operating an aircraft.

Dillon said Groton-New London, which opened in 1929 as Trumbull Airport, is one of six airports in Connecticut that are being assessed to determine what their role should be within the statewide system.

The [airport authority picked up responsibility](#) for state-owned airports two years ago and has been responsible for revitalizing Bradley Airport with the help of the MetroHartford Alliance, he said.

"Each airport has its own niche," Dillon said. "Southeastern Connecticut offers quite a bit in the way of business attractions as well as tourism attractions."

Dillon said the state has been looking into how Groton-New London can be used to enhance the overall marketing of the state's attractions, including Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos, two of the largest gaming destinations in the world.

The airport holds the potential of enhancing the casinos' customer base by bringing in tourists by air, he said.

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