

Western Reserve Port Authority Suspends Financial Support for Chicago Flights

Aug. 17, 2016 (VIENNA, Ohio) — At its meeting Wednesday, the Western Reserve Port Authority board unanimously voted to suspend financial support for daily flight service via Great Lakes JetExpress operated by Aerodynamics Inc. (ADI) from the Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport (YNG) to Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD).

The port authority notified ADI of its decision after Wednesday's meeting. It will be ADI's decision to continue the flights unsubsidized, or to discontinue the flights altogether. Board members determined the flights would not be successful as operated by Great Lakes JetExpress/ADI after losing one of the two connecting flight agreements that were established prior to launch, despite being assured otherwise.

"Because the flights are subsidized with a public grant, we have an obligation to our community to minimize losses moving forward," said the port authority's executive director, John Moliterno. "Our mission is to advance aviation, and we won't stop doing that. We owe it to the people of the Mahoning Valley to continue trying to bring additional service from YNG."

While local passenger demand to Chicago O'Hare is better than expected, demand for connecting flights beyond Chicago O'Hare are far below what was expected. While bookings had increased steadily through the month of July on the strength of promotional fare rates, passenger reports from July 1 through August 16 show that only 11% of total passengers are booking connecting flights through O'Hare. Load factors for the daily service have averaged 28%. They needed to be significantly higher to eventually generate sufficient revenue to be self-sufficient.

The board cited reasons that were beyond its control for the underperformance of connecting flights that it directly attributed to the loss of the connecting flight agreement. Confusion with online booking was one of the primary reasons, as some customers had difficulty completing reservations with third-party booking websites, causing them to become frustrated and move on to another option. Other issues with baggage transfers at O'Hare, and limited connecting options plagued the service from the start.

A longer than expected timeframe to get reservation systems in place made it difficult for passengers to book flights in July, resulting in YNG missing out on the year's busiest month for air travel. Originally, the flights were expected to launch in April, which would have given travelers a few months ahead of time to book their flights for summer trips. Typically, travelers plan their trips as far ahead as possible. Pushing the launch date to July 1 reduced the window for travelers to book flights from YNG. With tickets going on sale June 1, travelers only had a month to book for July flights.

Still, the port authority believes that there is a strong market of support for daily service from YNG, as is evidenced by the higher than expected demand for local Chicago traffic, said its director of aviation, Dan Dickten.

"Passenger reviews of the flights and the service have been very good thus far," Dickten said. "Both public passengers and local businesses have been very supportive of this local travel option."

The board recommends those who have booked flights with the service to contact other carriers immediately to avoid any interruptions in their travel plans. This does not affect any Allegiant flights booked out of YNG.

Passengers who booked flights with Great Lakes JetExpress are entitled to a full refund from the carrier. Great Lakes Airlines will contact customers to discuss refund information. Customers can also get information by calling Great Lakes Airlines at [\(307\) 432-7265](tel:3074327265), or by emailing refunds@flygreatlakes.com.

About the Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport (YNG)

In Dec. 1991, Trumbull and Mahoning counties authorized the creation of the Western Reserve Port Authority, which assumed operations of the Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport on Jan. 1, 1992. It has a full-service FBO facility on site, and is home to the Youngstown Air Reserve Station, 910th Airlift Wing.
