

Local flights expanded

By MICHAEL PRAGER
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Airplane service from Walla Walla will increase by four flights next month as Cascade Airways expands its current schedule beginning Dec. 1.

Since the Nov. 1 takeover of Columbia-Pacific Airlines, Cascade's business has been soaring. When the new schedule takes effect, Walla Walla will be served by two more flights than it had prior to the takeover.

In addition to four new flights, two each to Seattle and Boise, the airline will improve service on other flights going through the City-County Airport here.

The Columbia-Pacific takeover has left Cascade in an enviable business position. Company executives say it is one of the fastest growing commuter airlines in the country.

And for the people of Walla Walla, that means more jobs and better airline service.

Prior to the takeover, Columbia Pacific had four Walla Walla departures, and Cascade, 17. With the new schedule, there will be a total 23 departures to cities served by Cascade. There also will be 23 arrivals.

Industry figures show the airline, based in Spokane and Walla Walla, now ranks fourth among the nation's commuter airlines. One company executive predicted the airline may move to second place next year.

Flying 963 flights a week in October, Cascade will be up to 1,143 weekly flights after the airline's new schedule takes effect next month, said Mark Nielson, director of scheduling.

General manager Seve Gural said the airline's secret is offering frequent flights to all destinations, a convenience to customers. Currently the airline provides service to Seattle, Spokane, Portland, Pasco, Yakima, Wenatchee, Boise and Lewiston.

Two new flights will be added on the route to Seattle and two direct flights will be added to Boise. A non-stop flight to Spokane will be new as will another non-stop flight to Portland.

In addition, Cascade plans to fly its pressurized 18-seat Metroliners from Walla Walla to Seattle at 6:15 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. and to Spokane at 9:30 a.m.

The Metroliners were obtained from Columbia-Pacific as part of the airlines' take-over agreement. Cascade previously flew only Beechcraft 99s with 15 seats.

Gural said the airline will be evaluating the performance of its two Metroliners with an eye on purchasing additional craft. He said the airline would prefer a 30-seat plane, but it may take another five years before they are commercially available.

"It's been a good time for commuter airlines because more people are flying," said Gural. "The frequency of flights has been our primary key."

Mark Chestnutt, airline president, said, "We are doing the same as we were doing before — very well. And we expect it to get better."

Cascade recorded 18,500 paid boardings in October. At present rates, it expects 21,500 this month and about 24,000 next month. In Walla Walla, that figure has jumped from 1,700 in October to an expected 2,000 this month.

Chestnutt noted that the new schedule will bring some time changes to old flights. He recommended that passengers check the new schedule.

Cascade's success in the Northwest is not without growing pains, however. Company officials say they are hoping to expand hangar space in Walla Walla to accommodate the airline's needs.

"We need to almost double our current space in Walla Walla," said Chestnutt.

Currently, Cascade performs most of its maintenance at Walla Walla. About 130 of the airline's 280 employees are based here for a local payroll of more than \$1 million a year. Within two years, employment figures in Walla Walla should reach 200, Gural said.

Most of the airline pilots are based here. However, top airline management, dispatch and flight operations officials are based in Spokane. Gural said it is not beyond possibility that the airline may move all its operations to Walla Walla some day. But no such plans exist now, he said.

"Walla Walla is blessed with a lot of flights primarily because our maintenance operation is there," Gural said.

Seventeen flights in and out of Walla Walla in October jumped to 19 after the takeover and will increase to 23 starting Dec. 1.



Cascade plans four more daily flights

U-B photo by Robert E. Clark