

# Fortunate to have increased air service in Sheridan

Believe it or not, the Sheridan community is very fortunate to have air service for our population size.

Billings-based Big Sky Air has flown three daily flights to Denver since winning the Essential Air Service subsidy in 2005.

On May 11, a second airline, Cheyenne-based Great Lakes Aviation, began service to Denver, also with three daily flights.

Beginning in June, Great Lakes will upgrade some flights from the current 19-seat aircraft to a 30-seater complete with a flight attendant, beverage service, and lavatory facilities.

Sheridan is exceptional not only in adding frequencies, but another air carrier as well. Even more exceptional is that both carriers are currently operating without federal subsidy.

In an era when many rural towns and cities have to offer incentives and/or revenue guarantees to retain air service, this is very remarkable.

A number of factors have worked in the area's favor. One is the natural resources, which draw anglers, hunters, dudes, and outdoor adventurers worldwide.

Growth in part- and full-time residents and business activity has maintained outbound demand.

More important have been the community's efforts to maintain air service. Airport management has kept the

facility attractive to passengers and operators alike by enlarging the (free) parking lot, refurbishing ramps and taxiways, and building the newest runway in the state.

For inbound visitors, two national car rental agencies offer compacts to SUVs and often will have those vehicles parked and warmed up outside the baggage-claim door.

Business and government leaders and Forward Sheridan made a successful business case to Great Lakes Aviation to return to Sheridan.

However, we identified challenges that the community must meet if the quality of air service is to be maintained and upgraded.

Reliability, baggage handling, availability of seats, and the cost of those seats are issues that need substantial improvement.

These issues are often the reasons travelers choose airports other than Sheridan. Some avoid the "small" planes that serve our airport.

The best solution, we feel, is larger airplanes. Larger aircraft obviously have more passenger comfort, generally are newer and hence more reliable,

## A Community Affair

Nick  
Cooper

*Planning for Sheridan's economic development*



have more baggage capacity, and offer the operator greater revenue.

To get larger, more comfortable planes, we must demonstrate to air carriers the demand exists.

At the same time, the passenger terminal will have to keep pace. It has

little room for growth, the Transportation Security Administration will need more space, and its infrastructure and amenities will need updating for both passengers and airline staff.

At the request of Frontier Airlines, Forward Sheridan and the Airline Task Force drafted a proposal for air service with guidance from The Boyd Group, an aviation consulting firm. This proposal included an accurate and in-depth analysis of the potential passenger market.

It is unlikely that Frontier would actually bring a 50- or 70-passenger plane here within the next few years; however, the process gave the community greater focus and a more professional approach to the airline industry.

Another outcome from this is the

upcoming "Fly Sheridan" marketing campaign to encourage support of the current carriers and thereby increase enplanements. This is a five-plus-year approach, but it will more likely succeed in improving our air service.

It is up to us residents and community leaders to rise to the challenges of maintaining and improving our air service in a very competitive environment.

It will take both business and leisure flyers to use the service we have and continue to do so. So we ask you to consider flying out of Sheridan and help the long-term economic health of our community.

*Editor's note: "A Community Affair" is a weekly column from citizens who support Forward Sheridan, a professional business organization of invested partners whose purpose is to develop and maintain a sound economy in Sheridan County. Philippe Chino is president/CEO of Forward Sheridan.*

*Nick Cooper moved here seven and a half years ago from Oregon, where he was a pilot flying freight, charter, aerial survey, and air ambulance.*

*Shortly afterward, he became part owner of The Book Shop. He also continues training as a facilitator in Touchstone (a communications workshop) and served on the Indian Paintbrush Festival board.*