

'Fly local' during the vacation season

A vibrant airport puts a community on the map and is essential to local growth.

As the summer travel season begins in earnest, more and more travelers are choosing the Gainesville Regional Airport — a welcome trend not only for the airport but also for North Central Florida.

Passenger traffic at the airport soared in the first four months



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of this year compared to last year, with 99,706 passengers from January through April this year compared to 87,354 for the same period last year, a 14 percent increase. The percentage of seats filled, or "load factor," was also up for both Delta and U.S. Airways, with Delta recording 91.5 percent seats filled this April, and U.S. Airways recording more than 85 percent seats filled. Both are highs for the year.

This uptick may reflect a trend

seen at other airports nationwide as the economic recovery takes hold. But it also may signal that more residents of the Ocala-Gainesville-Lake City region are recognizing the often considerable advantages of flying from the Gainesville Regional Airport. That can only be a positive development not only for the airport, but also for local businesses and for the regional economy — especially if it continues over the long term.

The local airport has long faced stiff competition from its counterparts in Orlando, Jacksonville and Tampa, with business and leisure travelers often viewing their decision on where to fly as a choice between less time in the car and cheaper, more direct flights.

To be sure, those circumstances sometimes apply. But it is also true that flights from the airport are often more competitively priced than perceived compared to equivalents at neighboring airports. The problem has sometimes been that travelers may simply assume the costs are disproportionate, without bothering to make the comparisons.

Meanwhile, the Gainesville Regional Airport offers advan-



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tages besides a far shorter trip in the car — advantages that too often go overlooked.

These include the lack of road tolls, far lower mileage on personal or work vehicles, and competitive parking rates. Another advantage is intangible but instantly appreciated by anyone who flies frequently: The parking lot at the local airport is less than a minute's pleasant walk from the terminal, while most travelers at the Tampa and Orlando airports must endure lurching bus or tram trips to reach terminals.

To promote these and other

benefits of using the local airport, the Gainesville-Alachua County Regional Airport Authority recently created a task force to meet with companies and organizations in the region. The purpose: to encourage endorsement of a "buy local" travel policy. The policy asks employees to check flight costs from the Gainesville Regional Airport as early as possible — and, reasonably, to include related costs like parking, mileage and tolls when making airfare comparisons with other airports.

The task force's efforts are important because the more business travelers use the airport regularly, the more its services stand to improve. Although Delta and US Airways serve Gainesville well, travelers would benefit from the addition of other carriers with more flights, more destinations and cheaper tickets. That can only happen if the airport demonstrates it can attract sufficient passenger numbers and loyalty.

A vibrant airport puts a community on the map and is essential to local growth, especially when it comes to attracting outside investment to our community.

As Brent Christensen, presi-

dent and CEO of the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce, has said, "The presence of a strong airport offering commercial service to major hubs is essential to successful economic development. In our experience, businesses expect consistent, on-time air connectivity when considering Gainesville/Alachua County."

The recent increase in the number of passengers at the Gainesville Regional Airport is encouraging. Indeed, Delta's current load factor, if sustained, may make it appropriate for the airline to add more seats.

Now, the challenge is to ensure this progress continues.

By stressing the advantages of the local airport with local businesses, the airport authority is targeting a major customer base. But whether traveling for pleasure or business, all North Central Florida residents would do well to consider "GNV" in their plans this summer. They stand to improve their trip — and contribute to the local economy in the bargain.

Win Phillips is the vice president for research at the University of Florida and chairman of the Gainesville-Alachua County Regional Airport Authority.