

Sunbird Will Stay With City

Increased Business Encourages Airline

By Alan Willis

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Sunbird Airlines plans to continue its commuter flights into and out of Winston-Salem's Smith Reynolds Airport, even if its federal operating subsidy is reduced or eliminated next year.

The commuter airline, based in Charlotte, has served Winston-Salem since 1982 and has been the only airline to provide regularly scheduled service at Smith Reynolds Airport since Piedmont Airlines discontinued service there two years ago.

Sunbird said early this year that it might have to end its service to Winston-Salem if federal airline-subsidy cutbacks proposed by the Reagan administration as an economy move were approved by Congress. Sunbird has received \$230,000 a year in subsidies for the last two years to support its service between Winston-Salem and Charlotte.

"Staying"

But Jan Bennett, director of sales and traffic for Sunbird, said yesterday that the company will not pull out of Winston-Salem. "With or without the subsidy, we will be staying," she said, because of improved business for the line at Smith Reynolds Airport.

Sunbird also plans to submit a new application for a federal subsidy, based on the close ties it has developed with Piedmont Airlines in recent years. Ms. Bennett said, "We are working on another proposal to the U.S. Department of Transportation now, and it should be ready in another month or so," she said. The present subsidy expires in April 1986.

Overlooked

The existing subsidy arrangement did not take into account the improvement in Sunbird's business over its whole three-state system since Sunbird became a "Piedmont Commuter" line in May. Ms. Bennett explained, Sunbird and Piedmont had concluded a joint marketing agreement in 1982, and the federal government officially designated Sunbird as the air carrier to serve Smith Reynolds in April 1984, when the subsidy was approved.

As a Piedmont Commuter line, one of five such lines allied with Piedmont around the country, Sunbird is on Piedmont's reservations system and timetables, and its planes have been repainted in Piedmont's colors, with the Piedmont bird symbol on the tail. Sunbird's schedules are closely coordinated to provide maximum convenience for commuting passengers bound for Piedmont's hub in Charlotte, to catch flights to other Piedmont destinations.

Sunbird now has five daily flights between Winston-Salem and Charlotte. See Sunbird, Page 23

Sunbird

Continued From Page 17

lotte and will add a sixth daily flight on Jan. 15.

"With the Piedmont Commuter deal, we think we can show that traffic is increasing, and with that trend, a continued subsidy will be worthwhile," Ms. Bennett said. Sunbird probably will ask for the subsidy to continue at about the same amount.

Passenger boardings have improved enough at Smith Reynolds Airport for Sunbird to continue service there regardless of the federal government's final decision on the subsidy, however, Ms. Bennett said. Boardings here have increased from 329 for the month of May to about 600 last month, she said. The local service also makes it easier for Sunbird's own officials to commute from Charlotte to Piedmont Airlines' headquarters here, she added.

Roger E. Morgan, manager of the airport, said Sunbird's decision to continue serving Smith Reynolds is welcome news, in light of local airport officials' continuing efforts to preserve and expand scheduled airline service here. "We're all for it," Morgan said. "We have been watching their boarding increases with pleasure. Any time anybody can increase their business and their service here, we're in favor of that."

Sunbird service is "very important" to Smith Reynolds Airport, Morgan said. "We need somebody to haul passengers in and out of here." Sunbird serves 13 cities in the Carolinas and Georgia with 88 flights a day and will expand its service to those cities to 100 daily flights on Jan. 15, Ms. Bennett said. The company also plans to announce the addition soon of five new, larger and faster planes to its present fleet of five 15-passenger and three 30-passenger planes, Ms. Bennett said.