

# Airline: Under-use led to cancellation

By DK McDONALD The Daily News

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**BULLHEAD CITY** — American Airlines is cancelling service to Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport due to under-use of the service, airline officials said.

“Our network planning team constantly evaluates our network,” said LaKesha Brown, American Airlines spokeswoman. “Our efforts are to make changes that strengthen our network and we must consider changes to networks that don’t perform in line with our expectations, therefore (we’re) having to cancel service between Phoenix and Laughlin/Bullhead airport.”

The carrier looks for strong local demand to keep and continue service, Brown said.

“It’s a business relationship and this is a business decision,” said Mohave County Airport Authority Board President John Hastings. “I’ve worked on it for so long, to have it not work out is personally devastating, but it’s devastating to everyone who lives here, though they may not even know it.”

The daily flight service was expected to have an annual economic impact of over \$13 million. Hastings noted in October 2016, at the time the arrival of American Airlines passenger service was announced, that if the service was not used and was not profitable, LBIA would lose it.

“Since 1998, my goal has been to get us air service so the business community could grow and we could bring more and better jobs to the community,” Hastings said. “Having service improves the entire quality of life for everyone here. There are so many drawbacks to not having it and so many potential benefits.”

In what he called a lengthy conversation, American Airlines representatives notified Hastings more than a week ago the airline would not continue daily passenger service to the Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport beyond Feb. 14, 2018. Hastings announced the loss of service Thursday evening during a Bullhead Area Chamber of Commerce mixer at the airport.

“It’s very disappointing,” said Bullhead City Mayor Tom Brady. “For years and years we’ve tried to entice a major airline and finally got one. After nearly a year, the numbers didn’t prove sufficient to keep American Airlines here.”

The Airport Authority, the airport team and community partners could not have worked harder to make the service a success, said LBIA Airport Director Jeremy Keating.

“We really blitzed the service,” he said. “Ads, videos at the casinos, the mobile billboard, flyers — we’ve put \$250,000 of airport marketing dollars toward this. Our air service consultant told me they had never witnessed an airport so invested in making air service work — that’s not a usual thing. Daily air service doesn’t benefit the airport, it benefits the community. It was hard to hear, but good to know there was nothing else we could have done.”

Passengers who used the service were generally positive about it. It was seen as a great alternative to driving to Phoenix and for some it was a convenience to fly from the local airport regardless of the eventual destination.

Others who explored flying out of Laughlin/Bullhead said the cost and time elements weren't favorable when compared to flying out of Las Vegas McCarron International Airport. With service limited to Phoenix, passengers from Laughlin/Bullhead used the local flights to connect with flights to other destinations. In some cases, that meant a layover of several hours — sometimes longer than 12 hours — before getting a connecting flight to their final destination.

Keating said he wants the community to understand how much time and effort has been expended on the effort to secure a major carrier.

“Over the years, we've had 50 one-on-one meetings and multiple conferences,” Keating said. “We knew that if we got service, it was going to be difficult to keep. John (Hastings) doesn't get enough credit for the work he has done over the years to get service; he's been a volunteer on the board for years. John is our air service champion and we've been very lucky and fortunate to have him.”

Future daily airline service is unlikely, Hastings said.

“As I've been saying for more than 10 years and been chastised for saying so at least 1,000 times, none of us here are going to live long enough to see daily service return,” he said. “But that does not mean there will be no future service.”

Hastings said he feels a responsibility to do what he can to create a situation to support a future effort.

“To that end, it's important that people use the service before it is gone,” Hastings said. “Those numbers will be what is used going forward.”

Keating agreed.

“It's a challenge, but it is key to fill those flights before the service is gone,” Keating said. “Airlines will collect that data and look at it when evaluating possible future service, and if we can pop those final numbers it will help us down the road. Having not good December and January numbers works against us down the road.”

The airport itself is doing well, with strong charter service, Keating said.

“We'll never give up,” he added. “There is always hope. Getting service, a new route, was a feat in itself. To the community, I'll say if you've used the service, thank you and please use it again before it's gone. Thank you for your support.”