

# End of an era: American makes final flights between BHC and Phoenix

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Thirty-nine people boarded the last American Airlines daily scheduled flight Wednesday from Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport to Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix. The airline announced in November its plans to discontinue daily scheduled service at the end of its one-year service agreement due to under-use of the service.

**BULLHEAD CITY** — John Hastings, Mohave County Airport Authority president, stepped off the last inbound American Airlines daily scheduled flight Wednesday afternoon.

“It was a great flight,” he said.

The airline notified Hastings in November of its plans to discontinue daily scheduled service to Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport at the end of its one-year service agreement due to under-use of the service.

Area residents Greg and Pat Attl flew home on the airline’s last inbound flight after attending a Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans.

“It’s a sad time,” said Greg Attl. “We’ve taken flights in and out four or six times since the service started — it was very convenient and always good for us.”

American Airlines was announced as the daily passenger service provider in October 2016, and began daily scheduled passenger service to and from LBIA in February 2017 through regional carrier American Eagle, operated by SkyWest, out of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

Hastings noted at the time that the arrival of American Airlines passenger service marked a new era of economic growth and enhanced quality of life for the region, with an expected annual economic impact of over \$13 million. He also said that if the service was not used and was not profitable, LBIA would lose the service.

That forewarning apparently came to pass. During previous updates on the service, passenger counts were not considered sufficient and attempts to increase those counts apparently didn't do enough to persuade American Airlines to extend its one-year agreement.

"I've probably sent 24 letters to every executive at American Airlines; I even got some responses," Attl said. "It's an economic thing, I guess — I didn't think we would need 150,000 people in Bullhead City to support an airline."

After 18 people disembarked at Gate Three, 39 more boarded for the last American Airlines flight from LBIA to Sky Harbor International Airport.

"We didn't even know this is the last flight on American Airlines going out," said Craig Lawson, who flew in with his wife, Vicki, to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary. "It's sad. We were here years ago when there were planes flying in and out, but we didn't have time then. We said if we ever came back, we would fly in. It was a bucket list kind of thing. We would have stayed longer, but wouldn't have been able to fly out."

LBIA Airport Director Jeremy Keating said the day was bittersweet.

"It was fantastic while it lasted," he said. "I think I used the service seven or eight times within the year, it was really convenient — extremely convenient. I could get from the front of my house to sitting here in 15 minutes. That was really nice."

Airport officials still hope to find a carrier service, Keating said.

"We're going to continue our effort see who might be interested in starting scheduled service again, so it's not the end of the world," he said. "Hopefully the area grows a little bit more, with Dot Foods and businesses coming to the area and more people moving here' that maybe at some point in the future we'll find a carrier that's willing to try again. It's going to be without a minimum risk guarantee, that's what's going to be really hard — because we can't get one again."

The arrival of daily service in 2017 was the culmination of more than a decade of labor on the part of Airport Authority staff and its many community partners.

Efforts to attract scheduled air service took a positive turn in 2008 when the airport was awarded a Small Community Air Service Development grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation and continued to gain momentum in 2010 when Sixel Consulting Group was hired by the airport to help organize air service development strategies.

The airport authority was awarded another grant, which provided \$750,000 toward the recruitment of an airline to bring scheduled air service to the community. The Small Community Air Service Development Program grant supplemented the minimum revenue guarantee to American Airlines.

The required \$750,000 match was guaranteed through the partnership between public entities like the city of Bullhead City and private individuals, businesses and other sources. An additional \$600,000 of in-kind support was pledged for marketing and advertising.

As the search continues, the airport remains busy and strong, Keating said.

"The airport is not closing, like some people say," he said. "The charter flights are going strong with the two casino resorts — those aren't going to end, they'll continue to operate and bring a lot of people into the area."