

# Officials say Southwest's direct flights to boost hubs, Panhandle

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WEST BAY - Southwest Airlines' decision to fly from Bay County directly to Houston, Nashville, Tenn., Orlando and Baltimore-Washington International means more tourism, more business and more economic growth, city leaders say.

"Economic development follows wherever Southwest goes," said Jeff Hite, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce business recruitment director. Nashville benefited when Southwest became its low-cost carrier in the mid-1980s. The company is known to hire locally and offer an upbeat, customer-friendly atmosphere. Panama City is sure to see benefits, just as Nashville did, Hite said.

With direct flights to the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, Nashville likely will see more tourism, which means a boost to the country- music capital's tourism industry, Hite said. About 10 million people a year visit Nashville, but the city hopes to capture a few companies that want to locate an office in Nashville for quick access to the Panhandle area Hite said, "The more awareness of transportation between the two the better for both," Hite said.

Bay County real estate also might pick up as more Nashville residents look for vacation homes and investments, said Mike Nichols, Greater Nashville Association of Realtors president. For years, Panama City and Destin have been hot-spot vacation destinations for Nashville residents, but Southwest is opening the market for quick and affordable access, Hite said.

For instance, Delta Air Lines, which also serves Panama City will keep its fares competitive, said Susan Elliott, Delta spokeswoman. Delta's holiday airfare starts at \$69 to Baltimore, according to the carrier's Web site. Southwest also is offering \$69 fares to Baltimore, if booked by Friday.

Affordable translates to more real estate sales and, eventually, higher housing prices as people snap up real estate along the Panhandle. The more people notice Bay County, the better off the real estate market will be, Haiman said. "There is a greater sense of optimism in the marketplace," said Darren Haiman, Bay County Association of Realtors president-elect. "As demand increases and the supply remains, prices will go up." Sales have improved, but Haiman could not say how much of that is linked to Southwest's plans to be the local low-cost carrier. Other hubs see benefits to direct flights to Panama City, too. Northwest Florida's goal to be a part of the next aerospace corridor could benefit from a direct flight to Houston, said Jorge Franz, Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau tourism vice president.

Aerospace engineering is a large industry in Houston, he said. Until the corridor develops, tourism likely will be a big draw for families, Franz said. "Any new flight - we look at it as potential," Franz said. Any new flight to the city is a good thing for us."

Houston was among Southwest's first airports it served in 1971, and the city has seen growth because of the carrier. Houston is the fourth largest city in the U.S. and an energy business hub, Franz said. "Houston is already a renowned hub for the Gulf Coast, and this important addition of the Florida Panhandle serves as an air bridge to create even more jobs and growth opportunities," Greater Houston Partnership President and CEO Jeff Moseley wrote Wednesday in an e-mail. "Christmas has come early, and Southwest Airlines has brought us a present - that we're excited to open - by announcing this nonstop flight that gives Houston and Panama City more opportunities to grow business."

In Orlando, vacationers might stay longer, said Danielle Courtenay, spokeswoman for the Orlando/Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau Inc. Most of Orlando's visitors are Floridians, she said. Tourism brings the Orlando-area economy \$30 billion a year, Courtenay said. "Making sure we are accessible to the world is always going to be very positive on our destination," Courtenay said.