

SLT solidifies end of commercial air service

By Kathryn Reed

A significant chapter in Lake Tahoe Airport's history came to a close Tuesday when the City Council unanimously agreed to give up the FAA certificate that allows commercial air service.

Aircraft carrying high rollers and celebrities for the annual golf tournament will still be regular fixtures at Lake Tahoe Airport – and some of those planes are substantial in size. The decision also isn't likely to be noticeable to pilots or the general public.

Formally called the Federal Aviation Regulation Part 139 Certificate, this is what the feds require for commercial service to be allowed at airports. Inspections are done annually to ensure an airport meets the specifications. Files and logs kept by the fixed based operator are looked at; the runway and taxiways have to be the correct slope; the pavement must be in a certain condition, as well as markings, lighting, and signage; rescue and firefighting equipment are analyzed, as are personnel training records. The fuel farm and mobile fueler's fire suppression equipment is also checked.

And while no one from the FAA is going to continue to do these inspections, the city intends to maintain the airport as if it had the 139 certificate. According to Michael Golden, who runs Mountain West Aviation – the fixed base operation, this is something pilots like because it means the airport is run at a higher standard than other facilities.

If the day comes that the city wants to have commercial service, it still could. It means filling out FAA paperwork and having an airline lined up. More significantly it could

mean a \$15 million investment – in today’s dollars – to bring the runway up to specifications for certain types of aircraft. It’s also possible that depending on the airline and plane used, that type of capital outlay would not be needed.



TWA was one of several airlines that used to fly into Lake Tahoe Airport. Photo/Del Laine

It was pointed out that rules can change and there is no guarantee the city would have the means or ability to jump through whatever new hoops the FAA erects.

And the figure above doesn’t include the couple million dollars the terminal would likely need to bring it up to national Transportation Security Administration (TSA) regs.

The city’s certificate has been in the inactive status because no commercial flights have come in for 14 years.

The reality the elected were faced with on March 17 was that the last commercial flight in and out of the South Lake Tahoe airport was in 2001. This was long after the peak in 1978 of almost 300,000 enplanements. When the city embarked on updating the master plan, which was required after a settlement agreement expired in 2012, the future of the

airport had to be decided.

Last summer the council at the time voted to have the airport become a general aviation facility without commercial service. This week's vote solidified that decision. It also will keep the airport subsidy to \$354,000 a year. It was expected to increase nearly another \$120,000 based on changes to the training for firefighters. (At the peak, the city was subsidizing the airport with \$600,000 a year from the general fund.)

Fire Chief Jeff Meston told the council training will still occur – but onsite, instead of offsite as the feds now mandate.

Another issue the city will have to tackle is replacing the 30-plus-year-old vehicle used specifically for fighting an airplane fire. They cost almost \$1 million.

The staff report says, "Without a letter of intent from an air carrier, it's unlikely that the FAA would participate in funding a new (Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting) vehicle."