

BUSINESS

Alaska Airlines launches academy to address pilot shortage

By **JAMIE GOLDBERG**
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Alaska Airlines is prepared to spend millions of dollars to help students attend an Oregon flight school, get their commercial pilot licenses and then get them flying planes for Horizon Air, its regional sister carrier.

The Seattle-based air group is partnering with the Hillsboro Aero Academy to launch Ascend Pilot Academy, which will offer training in either Hillsboro or Redmond. The airline will offer low-interest flight school loans, cover the cost of a commercial pilot license, then give the new pilots a job upon completing the program.

It's the latest attempt from an airline to shore up its hiring pipeline as carriers across the country try to navigate serious pilot shortages that have forced delays, cancellations and higher plane ticket prices.

Other airlines, too, have recently opened their own flight academies to entice candidates who otherwise may not have pursued a career as a pilot.



Mark Graves/The Oregonian, File

Alaska Airlines and its regional sister carrier Horizon Air are launching a flight school program with the aim of addressing the pilot shortage. Applications for spots in the new flight academy are now open and the airlines are hoping the first cohort of prospective pilots will begin training April 1, 2022.

While passenger volume is only 9% lower than pre-pandemic levels, the number of domestic flights is still down 16% compared to before the pandemic, according to a report released this month by Airlines for America, a trade association that represents major North American airlines.

Scott Keyes, the Portland-based founder of the travel discount website Scott's Cheap Flights, said

airlines have been unable to keep up with rebounding travel demand due in large part to the pilot shortage. That shortage predated the pandemic, but airlines made things worse when they offered pilots early retirement packages early in the pandemic to cut costs.

One report from consulting firm Oliver Wyman estimates that the U.S. will be short 12,000 pilots by the end of 2023.

"When the airlines reacted to the beginning of the pandemic by really freezing their hiring, not continuing with their ramp-up plans like they had, it seemed like a prudent decision," Keyes said. "But now with travel rebounding much more quickly than anyone expected, airlines have been caught pretty flat-footed."

To fill the gap, major airlines are hiring pilots away

from regional carriers. About 80% of pilots hired by major airlines in 2022 are expected to come from regional airlines, said Carlos Zendejas, Horizon Air's vice president of flight operations.

That could squeeze the regional airlines, Keyes said, and lead to more cuts in service to smaller destinations, leaving people in places like Medford and Eugene with fewer flight options.

Zendejas said airlines will need to hire more than 10,000 pilots in 2022, double the number of pilots who were hired in 2019. He said Alaska and Horizon alone anticipate they will need to hire 2,000 more pilots by 2025.

Students with little to no flight experience who enroll in the new Ascend Pilot Academy will get access to low-interest loans to help them pay for the training program, a \$3,500 stipend to cover their flight instructor certification, a \$25,000 stipend to cover the cost of obtaining a commercial pilot license and a conditional job offer from Horizon Air, contingent on completing the program.

The total cost of participating in the Ascend Pilot Academy and obtaining a commercial pilot license will be between \$65,000-\$80,000, Zendejas said. He said the airlines hope the stipend and low-interest loans will be enough to entice prospective students who previously saw a career as a pilot as cost-prohibitive.

"What we're seeing at Horizon is a lot of pilot attrition, so we're in the process of backfilling for that," Zendejas said. "We have some programs in place, including our Pilot Development Program, which is a partnership with established flight schools and universities, but this academy program will give us another source of pilots, so as we look to the future, more of our pilots can come from our pipelines."

Applications for spots in the new flight academy are now open and the airlines are hoping that the first cohort of prospective pilots will begin training April 1. Zendejas said they hope 250 new pilots will go through the academy each year.

Oregonians see homelessness as top issue facing the state

By **ANNA DEL SAVIO**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — When Oregon's legislative leaders unveiled a plan to address homelessness last month, they stressed that it is not just a Portland, or even an "urban," problem.

"Those who are unhoused and unsheltered are as diverse as our community itself," said Rep. Jason Kropf, a Democrat whose Central Oregon district is flanked by the Deschutes National Forest and includes much of Bend.

The regional concern on display in the capitol last month reflected the views of Oregon residents, most of whom — regard-

less of ZIP code — want local leaders to make responding to homelessness their No. 1 priority.

More than three quarters of Multnomah County residents and other urban Oregonians said it was very important or urgent for leaders in their communities to make doing something about homelessness their top priority, a recent survey from the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center found.

"Getting the economy back is an important first step. Getting people with addictions and mental health issues treated is the next step," one Multnomah County resident stated.

But even in rural and suburban

areas, at least 60% of residents surveyed in November identified homelessness as a topic of high priority.

Most Oregonians identified mental illness, substance abuse or a lack of affordable housing as the top reasons why people become homeless.

The lawmakers who highlighted their \$400 million package to ease homelessness and promote low-cost housing were careful not to claim victory.

"I want to make clear these investments will not solve every problem overnight," said Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene. "But Oregonians have immediate needs right now."

More now see homelessness as an urgent issue

Overall, 70% Oregonians surveyed in November said it was very important or urgent for leaders to make homelessness their top priority. Asked a similar question in an October 2020 survey by Oregon Values and Beliefs Center, 50% of residents answered very important or urgent.

While seven out of 10 Oregonians believed ending homelessness should be a top priority for leaders, only six in 10 agreed that with the right policies and resources, homelessness could be solved in their communities.

Rural Oregonians were

slightly more pessimistic than urban and suburban residents. Some respondents favored a harsher approach, forcing homeless people off the streets and into shelters. Others said that while a few people may refuse help, the right policies and resources could get most people into homes.

With local and state elections approaching in May, homelessness is likely to become a key issue throughout the state. And, the survey said, those seeking office are likely to face tough questions as fewer than 12% of Oregonians are satisfied with the homelessness services where they live.

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