

Boutique Air looks to stay after giving departure notice

Ridership in Pendleton on the rise as small airline changes direction

By JOHN TILLMAN
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Boutique Air gave notice in February that it wants to pull out of Pendleton, but the U.S. Department of Transportation grounded that request. And now the airline is seeking a new contract.

Oregon Regional Airport Manager John Honemann said Boutique's notice came as the number of passengers flying the small airline in Pendleton began to increase after falling during the pandemic.

Boutique Air relies on the federal Essential Air Service program to stay in business in Pendleton. The U.S. Department of Transportation oversees the EAS program, which subsidizes airlines to connect communities across the country that otherwise would not receive scheduled air service.

Boutique in 2016 won an EAS contract for 21 round trips a week between Pendleton and Portland, with the option to operate one service a day to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport instead of Portland. The Pendleton City Council in 2018 awarded a four-year, \$10.4 million EAS extension to Boutique. While the U.S. Department of Transportation foots the bill, the federal agency follows the local community's direction.

The transportation department's February list of communities receiving the subsidy shows only one place in Oregon: Pendleton.

Honemann explained the EAS contract with Boutique was due to expire Dec. 31, 2022, and Boutique submitted a Notice of Termination of Service to the DOT.

Honemann said the reason for the notice was economic, with Boutique citing "wages, fuel



Charly Hotchkiss/East Oregonian
Passengers board a Boutique Airlines flight to Portland, Thursday, April 14, 2022, at the Eastern Oregon Regional Airport, Pendleton. Boutique maintains the second largest fleet of Pilatus PC-12 single-engine turboprops in the country.

costs, inflation, supply chain issues with aircraft parts." Additionally, he said, there is a "pilot shortage and downward pressure on industry as pilots move up to larger aircraft, and carriers that offer higher salaries."

The federal transportation department on Feb. 24 accepted the notice, Honemann said, and on March 21 issued an order prohibiting termination of service and requesting proposals.

"The EAS contract and bid process for Pendleton has been accelerated and moved from later in the year to now, seven months early," he said.

The bids were due April 11. "The DOT received one bid for our EAS service," Honemann said. "That respondent was Boutique Airlines."

The East Oregonian left messages for local Boutique Air manager Shawn Simpson, but as of Friday, April 22, he had not offered a comment.

Passenger numbers rising

The number of passengers boarding the small airline monthly hit 447 in March in Pendleton, the most since February 2020, the start of the pandemic, which had 541, according to data

from Honemann.

"There was an obvious decrease in enplanements in early 2020 when the country went into pandemic response mode, and some recovery later in 2020 and into 2022," he said.

Boutique in 2019 at Pendleton, he reported, had a total of 6,763 passengers. Then ridership plunged as the pandemic ramped up, with the airline recording 343 passengers in March of that year and just 58 in April. That was the low point, though, according to the data.

Since then, Boutique Air's passenger count has been climbing, with occasional dips punctuating the trend.

"We are not at pre-pandemic enplanements, lagging (more than) 25% compared to averaged pre-pandemic enplanements," Honemann said.

Boutique in November and December 2021 carried 416 and then 399 passengers, but in January the numbers dropped 297. Honemann said that was not due to the coronavirus.

"January 2022 was a rough month for weather in Pendleton and Portland (with) low ceiling, freezing fog conditions, snow," he explained. "Weather cancella-

tions were the primary cause of that dip."

Honemann offered some industry context about Boutique's termination notice.

"Skywest, a major EAS provider," he said, "also submitted a Notice of Termination of Service to the DOT for 29 communities, citing similar economic challenges."

Honemann also said he does not think recent developments at the Walla Walla Regional Airport are going to dent Boutique's numbers.

Alaska Air Group, parent company of Alaska Airlines, is planning to transition from turboprop planes to full-jet aircraft for its Horizon Air services sometime in 2023.

The Embraer 175 jet aircraft will be the newest addition to the airport, replacing the turboprop Bombardier Q400, which has served passengers for many years and is considered a good workhorse aircraft for regional flights.

The Port of Walla Walla is preparing now for the switch, with a facilities remodel to accommodate the new planes.

But Horizon's flights out of Walla Walla go to Seattle,

Honemann said, not to Portland. He said "there is little to zero competition" so the platform shift for service of the Walla Walla to Seattle route won't have an effect on enplanements or operations at Pendleton.

Praise for Boutique

Honemann said he is pleased with Boutique, which maintains the second largest fleet of Pilatus PC-12 single turboprops in the country.

"I really like our level of service and provider, Boutique, and think it is a great model for the needs of our community," he said. "No TSA. (Pendleton to Portland) in under an hour. Three round-trip flights a day. Excellent airframe and platform. Feels like you are flying private."

On April 18, Honemann updated progress on the contract award process.

"Last week, DOT got one bid (from Boutique) for a two-year contract. We're now gathering statements of support from the community," he said. "Those need to be in by May 3. I don't see any issues in the award process. We should have uninterrupted service with the same provider. I think that's a good thing."

Pendleton Economic Development Director Steve Chrisman said airlines have been having a rough go.

"Boutique had staffing shortages even before the pandemic," he said. "The contract was made well in advance, so there were also wage issues. When COVID hit, the big airlines encouraged early retirement, but business recovered a lot faster than expected. They needed to get more staff, and where else than from the little airlines?"

Long-term, however, he said, Boutique's service in Pendleton "will be healthier and more reliable under the new contract."

Honemann said the next step for the airport and airport commission is to provide a statement/comment for the formal record.

Umatilla plans new footbridge to replace old one destroyed in floods

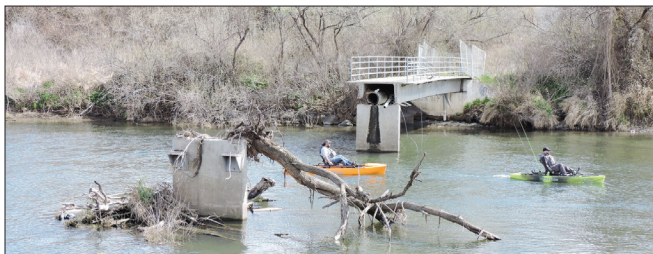
By ERICK PETERSON
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — Umatilla City Manager David Stockdale said hangups with the Federal Emergency Management Agency have delayed a \$7.2 million project to replace the footbridge the city lost when the Umatilla River flooded in 2019 and 2020.

"They've been great to work with, but it's been three steps forward and two steps back all along the way," he said.

He said the agency has changed representatives frequently, leading to misunderstandings between it and the city. Stockdale said his office has had to submit and resubmit the same information, repeatedly. With the approval of FEMA, Stockdale said the city of Umatilla has a green light, and he announced a timeline.

Work on the bridge begins in July, with a demolition crew removing the demolished bridge from the Umatilla River. Pieces, which now exist either in the river or



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian
Boaters on Thursday, April 14, 2022, float past the remains of a footbridge in Umatilla. The city starts work this summer on the \$7.2 million project to replace the bridge.

along the bank, will be taken from the area.

"That might take a month in July and August," he said.

Actual construction, he added, will start in the winter of 2022-23, and completion will be in early fall the following year.

FEMA will provide \$4.7 million for the project, Stockdale said. The state of Oregon will chip in \$500,000, and the city will take out a \$1 million loan to help cover the remaining amount.

"We did get some insurance proceeds, but they were very low, \$100,000," Stockdale said.

Fixing a water main

that was part of the bridge adds another \$1 million to the project, with \$750,000 coming from FEMA and \$250,000 from a state emergency grant.

"The new bridge will be a significant improvement over the old one," Stockdale said.

It will be about 140 feet longer in length, as the abutments will be set back farther on the shoreline than the ones on the old bridge. The new bridge also will be higher than the old one by 8 feet and have a "slow and steady arch," he said.

"If the old bridge was at this elevation, it would not have been damaged by

flood," Stockdale said.

A steel-frame bridge, it will not require a mid-river pier support. This will remove a hazard from the river, which troubled recreationalists and created a damming effect during floods.

"We're really excited about the enhancements," he said, which also include a boathouse, benches and information boards.

Stockdale said the old bridge was important to the community. A hundred students a day crossed the bridge to get to school. Other people crossed, too, as they walked downtown.

More improvements

Stockdale said more is planned for both sides of the bridge. The city obtained a recreational trails program grant from Oregon last year and plans to construct a new trail that will go from Powerline Road and loop down and connect to the new bridge.

"That will go in at the same time we are building the bridge," he said.

Also in the works, thanks to a grant from the land and water conservation fund, is a playground, pavilion and sidewalks at Nugent Park. The trail and playground will meet federal standards for accessibility.

As the city recently installed a new restroom at the park and has made improvements to the nearby Little League field, Stockdale boasted the area is on its way to being something special.

Mobile Service Outstanding Computer Repair

Fast & Reliable
Call or Text 24/7
Dale Bogardus 541-297-5831

Stay up-to-date with Microsoft's most advanced operating system to date,

Windows 11

Desktops and laptops in stock

Or upgrade yours today for the best security!

House calls (let me come to you!)
Drop Offs & Remote Services are Available

All credit cards accepted



Reelect David Baum Oregon Trail Electric Board, Position 8

STATEMENT TO VOTERS: The electric utility industry is seeing significant changes due to increased demand, new technologies, government mandates, high prices of natural gas and oil, and weather renewables (solar and wind). Weather renewables work only when the Sun is shining and the Wind is blowing.

Currently OTEC purchases 100% of its electrical power from Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and some of the lowest electrical rates in the country. But BPA is being challenged with increasing costs, reduced revenue, and threat of the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. As the board member involved with the Wildfire Mitigation Plan, we have aggressively pushed forward with the drafting and finalization of a Wildfire Plan.

As we negotiate a new contract with Bonneville (BPA), my legal experience is a valuable evaluation tool. My focus will be to continue to work diligently in areas of Power Supply, Transmission and Distribution. I will strive to keep your electrical rates low.

Our CEO, Les Penning and staff with board support will not be raising your electrical rates for 2022.

It's been a pleasure and a privilege to serve as your representative on the board of Directors. I have gained significant knowledge and experience about cooperatives during this time. I will continue to work hard at keeping electric rates low while providing safe and reliable electricity to our members along with excellent customer service. I have knowledge, experience, energy and time to serve.

I ask for YOUR VOTE and look forward to our future challenges.

Paid For By David Baum / The Committee to Reelect David Baum

2022

I ♥ Northeast Oregon

PHOTO
CONTEST



Visit lagrandeobserver.com and enter today!