



**SALINE COUNTY
COMMISSION**

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November 28, 2023

Mr. Michael Martin
U.S. Department of Transportation
Essential Air Service Program
1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20590
Via: Email to Michael.F.Martin@dot.gov

RE: DOT-OST-2002-11376, Salina Community Comments Concerning Air Carrier Proposals

Dear Mr. Martin:

The Saline County Commission is in receipt of Essential Air Service (EAS) proposals submitted by SkyWest Airlines (SkyWest) and Boutique Air (Boutique) to the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) for subsidized air service at the Salina Regional Airport (SLN).

Saline County appreciates that both air carriers expressed interest in serving the Salina and Saline County market. We appreciate the time each carrier spent preparing their respective proposal and the variety of options they offer.

SLN is a high demand market that has historically performed in the top quartile of all EAS markets in terms of the number of passengers enplaned. The community has been very happy with the exemplary service provided by SkyWest d/b/a United Express since April 2018.

Coming out of the pandemic, roundtrip enplanements in CY 2021 were up almost 200% year-over-year to 36,402. Enplanements tapered thereafter, as SkyWest, wrestling with the industry pilot shortage, was forced to operate 'tag' flights in tandem with Hays, KS (HYS). Despite the 'tag', enplanement levels remain elevated as compared to any time prior April 2018.

After considering the two proposals, the Saline County Commission's recommendation is that USDOT accept the SkyWest proposal for a three-year Salina, KS EAS contract. There are several reasons for this:

1. Boutique's proposal does not meet the EAS needs for Salina, Saline County or SLN catchment area. Salina experienced 9 seat, single engine turboprop aircraft EAS service from 2012 to 2016 and annual passenger enplanements never exceeded 3,000. The SLN market will not support scheduled service utilizing 9-seat, single engine turboprop aircraft.
2. In discussions with SkyWest concerning the air carrier's proposal it is anticipated that the air carrier will discontinue the HYS tag. Dropping the tag results in a return to non-stop 50-seat CRJ-200 jet service to both Denver (DEN) and Chicago O'Hare (ORD) hubs under Federal Air Regulation Part 121 rules and procedures. SLN achieved its best passenger enplanement on SkyWest flights without being tagged with another community.
3. SkyWest's United Express codeshare is a significant difference maker. Since April 2018, SLN catchment area marketing has included the United brand and has resulted in increased passenger enplanements and a better return on USDOT's EAS subsidy support.
4. SkyWest's United codeshare provides SLN passengers with excellent access to the DEN and ORD hubs. Salina flights are gated at DEN and ORD in proximity to connecting flights and provide passengers traveling to/from our community the ability to make connecting flights within minimum connect times at the hubs.
5. SkyWest/United Express flight schedules are optimized to provide the greatest number of domestic and international connections at the DEN and ORD hubs.
6. SkyWest's United codeshare benefits Salina and Saline County passengers since domestic and international flights are booked via the united.com web site.

7. SkyWest's United Express service supports area business travel that is critical to the community's economic growth. Salina and Saline County businesses have both domestic and international travel requirements that are increasing.

For the reasons stated above, the Saline County Commission, on behalf of our local community, recommends that USDOT accept the SkyWest Airlines proposal for a three-year contract to provide EAS Program flights at Salina, KS.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert H. Vidricksen II, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners
Saline County, Kansas