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NEW AIRLINE PLANS FLIGHTS BETWEEN SANTA MARIA, CALIF., AND SACRAMENTO

Author: **LORE LAWRENCE**, *TELEGRAM-TRIBUNE, SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIF.*

Article Text:

Oct. 14--SANTA MARIA, Calif.--In the not too distant future, Central Coast residents may be flying direct to Sacramento.

A new company, Santa Maria Airlines, hopes to be in service by early spring and shortly thereafter begin flights to Sacramento from Santa Maria.

Initial flights will run from Santa Maria to Sacramento via a San Jose connection, said Jerry Mendonca, a former pilot and one of the company's founders. Depending on demand, the company hopes to add direct flights to Sacramento from Santa Maria, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara.

Only a month old, the airline was formed after the co-founders Mendonca, President David Baskett and Chief Financial Officer and San Luis Obispo resident Greg Vose -- experienced their own frustrations by not being able to take a direct flight to the state capital.

"Mr. Baskett and I suffered the indignity of having to fly to Los Angeles to go north," said Mendonca. "We decided there had to be a better way, and we started an airline."

So far, the fledgling company has collected one-third of the necessary \$1.5 million startup capital. Mendonca said the company was still looking for investors, particularly from San Luis Obispo.

"It is clear that this can be a profit-making route for this airline," said San Luis Obispo Mayor Allen Settle, who called the proposed direct flights "very welcome."

San Luis Obispo lost air service to Sacramento in May, when WestAir, the company that offered it, went out of business.

Other carriers at the airport refused to pick up the route, saying it would be a money loser even though airport statistics show 1,800 people took the flight every month.

It's not simple math, explained a Skywest spokesman. The airline now has an exclusive contract with United to fly planes under the United Express name.

United wants Skywest to fly passengers to "hubs" where the larger airline can put them on its flights to other parts of the country or globe. That cuts the motivation for Skywest to pick up a route to Sacramento, which isn't a hub, market development Vice President Steven Hart said recently.

American Eagle, the other major carrier in San Luis Obispo, has also shown no interest in the flights.

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