

Private Firm Ready to Offer Airport Bus Service

Friday, January 19, 2007

By Joe Grata

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

If the Port Authority eliminates the popular 28X Airport Flyer buses as it has proposed, a private company said it's willing to pick up much of the slack.

"We ran the route for 30 years," said Jamie Campolongo, president of Pittsburgh Transportation Group. It's subsidiaries include Airlines Transportation Co., Which still operates a scaled down shuttle service tailored mostly for guests of Downtown and Oakland hotels.

"First it was just the 28X and then 9/11 that forced us to cut back," he said. "But the private sector is here and willing to help fill the gap again" if the authority abandons the 28X route, introduced in 1996 as its first minibus route to connect people to Pittsburgh International Airport.

Mr. Campolongo said that Airlines Transportation would institute a dual-fare system, keeping the present one-way \$19 fare for business travelers -- a price that includes a \$2 fuel surcharge -- but creating a reduced fare of \$5 to \$7 for workers and students.

He said the company would also sell discounted passes for workers and might create a special ride program for the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University.

"We wouldn't stop at Robinson Town Centre like the 28X does, so the airport trip would be express," he said. "Even if the Port Authority reconsiders, we think we can offer a good deal."

The Port Authority has proposed to eliminate the 28X and 123 other routes, starting June 24, to help fill a projected \$75 million to \$80 million gap in its 2007-08 operating budget for the next fiscal year.

The 28X has been one of its most successful routes, carrying nearly 2,000 riders on an average weekday and up to 1,500 on weekends. The one-way cash fare between Downtown and the airport is \$2.25, but many people use passes or student or senior citizen IDs.

Authority spokesman Bob Grove said Pittsburgh Transportation Group may be reacting too quickly.

"It's premature to discuss the 28X as if it's already gone for good," he said. "There is a chance it could stay. That's why we're having public hearings. When a final plan is submitted in March, then our boards will make a final decision."

In addition, since the Port Authority serves as the primary regulatory agency for public transportation in Allegheny County, it has to approve any service expansion by private firms.

Airlines Transportation Co. operates a fleet of 25-passenger minibuses with rear luggage space. Besides scheduled service, the company adds buses "as business justifies," he said. "We have time and equipment flexibility that the authority doesn't."

Mr. Campolongo said in October that the company would consider paying an annual fee similar to \$600 per vehicle and \$1 per trip fee it pays at the airport for its cabs, airport shuttles and other transportation vehicles use the authority's West Busway to bypass Parkway West and Fort Pitt Tunnel congestion.

"We haven't heard a thing from them," he said. "I don't know why they would object. They're going to run fewer buses on it."

Pittsburgh Transportation Group also owns Yellow Cab Co., Embassy Coach Limousines, Checker Cab and Express Shuttle.

Mr. Campolongo said the company is increasing the size of its 300-cab fleet by 50 vehicles this year to serve an influx of people moving into Downtown residences and to address demand anticipated from transit riders who will lose service.

He said Yellow Cab plans to expand by another 50 to 80 vehicles next year when Majestic Star is to open a slot machine casino on the North Shore.