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# Atlanta flights on horizon

## Delta non-stop service could begin July 1

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Northwest Alabama Regional Airport board members have accepted a proposal from Delta Airlines for two non-stop flights from Muscle Shoals to Atlanta.

Airport Director Matthew Hea said Delta officials informed him the proposed schedule changes would be effective July 1.

"We're very pleased with it," Hea said. "The board is pleased with it. Everybody I've talked to is receptive to it."

The change would mean an end to the three daily flights to Memphis, Tenn., offered by Delta Connection. The drawback is the area loses one flight and the last flight out of the Shoals will depart at 10:35 a.m.

Hea said the passenger amount on the late afternoon flight was poor.

Delta will instead offer non-stop flights to Atlanta at 6:25 a.m. and 10:35 a.m. seven days a week, with the last flight leaving Atlanta for the Shoals at 7:30 p.m. Central time.

Hea said the early departure will allow business travelers to leave the Shoals, conduct their business and return to the Shoals on the night flight from Atlanta.

"Obviously there's better connections in Atlanta and we'll have two direct flights as opposed to one," Hea said. "There are more people interested in going to Atlanta as a destination than Memphis."

Hea said he will continue to work with Delta to ensure that local air fares are competitive with fares available at Huntsville International Airport.

"It's much more expensive to operate out of Atlanta," Hea said. "They will expect people to use this airline."

The airport board sent a letter of acceptance to Delta, along with letters of support from Muscle Shoals Mayor David Bradford and the Shoals Chamber of Commerce.

"This is exactly what we've been talking about for years," chamber President Steve Holt said.

Delta Airlines merged with Northwest Airlines in 2008 and served the Shoals through its commuter airline, Northwest Airlink.

Holt said there have been numerous surveys that indicate local travelers wanted a connection to Atlanta.

The Shoals has been without an Atlanta connection since late 1994 when GP Express Airlines left the area.

"We are excited," Holt said. "I know it's proposed and has to go through the approval process."

Holt said the change would need approval from the federal government's Essential Air Service program, which subsidizes commercial air service in the Shoals.

Holt said the chamber will have to ramp up its marketing efforts to ensure Shoals travelers are aware of the change.

"We have to make sure everybody knows about it and knows how to access it," he said.

Debbie Wilson, executive director of Florence-Lauderdale Tourism Bureau, said an Atlanta connection would be good for tourism, especially the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail courses in Colbert County. "It's going to be a tremendous help," she said.

Susan Elliott, a spokeswoman for Delta, declined to comment on the proposal.

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