

Regional hubbub

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Manhattan could have additional jet service as soon as this summer if negotiations between the city, airport officials and potential carriers go as planned.

The city's case in ongoing negotiations was bolstered Wednesday when a bill pushed by State Rep. **Sydney Carlin**, which includes an amendment that makes available \$1 million in state money per year for the next two years for the city, passed a conference committee.

The money is essentially a buyout designed to entice an airline to bring jet service to the area, and will be distributed only if a set number of passengers - presumably 70 percent occupancy - is not met. The goal is to add regional jet service to a major air hub - other than Kansas City - that would offer international flights, said airport director Peter Van Kuren. The money will be applied only to a future carrier.

Van Kuren and local legislators said they expect full flights for whichever airline decides to expand to Manhattan, thanks in part to a passenger demand analysis that was conducted in 2006.

"We're confident we will be more than able to fill the aircraft that were seeking and we think additional flights will be warranted once the air service has matured," Van Kuren said. "This will work well with the people we've identified as primary travelers; military, university personnel, and local businesses."

The demand analysis showed that somewhere around 440 passengers from Manhattan's "catchment area" - a region that includes Marshall and Washington counties to the north, Clay and Dickinson counties to the east, Morris County and Emporia to the south, and the eastern border of Pottawatomie County - travel to Kansas City or Wichita each day for connecting flights out of their respective airports.

"Only seven percent travel from Manhattan Regional Airport," Van Kuren said. " but the survey said people would like to travel out of Manhattan Regional Airport if the service was there."

The bill stipulates that the city will be responsible to pay \$250,000 before the state money can be tapped. Van Kuren said Manhattan is working with communities in the area to convince them to contribute to the pot.

An agreement with another carrier is also viewed as vital to Manhattan and Kansas State University's hopes of winning the contract for the coveted federal National Bio and Agro Defense Facility (NBAF). Gov.

Kathleen Sebelius said recently that a bill guaranteeing money for an airline would be a major factor in which city will get the prized facility.

Carlin wouldn't say the money was directly contrived to help attract the \$455 million project, but did observe that "we want air service to not stand in the way of the good development in the area."

Van Kuren said if plans proceed as expected an airline could begin steady service with 50-passenger jets by sometime within the next few months.

"It's hard to say right now," he said. "The airline industry is in such flux right now. Hopefully service will start by this summer."