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Airline targets small cities

The pricey start-up wants to make it easier and faster to fly within Florida.

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BOCA RATON

Business consultant Rich Paul-Hus travels throughout Florida, sometimes needing to reach midsized cities such as Tallahassee to see an important client.

But as in many states, it's often a hassle getting to Florida's small or midsized cities. It usually requires standing in long security lines at busy airports in Fort Lauderdale or Miami, switching to a commuter plane in Orlando or even Atlanta, and paying for an overnight hotel stay because there are no flights home until the next day.

Other alternatives are spending several unproductive hours driving or using a very expensive charter plane.

So count Paul-Hus as one of many people eagerly anticipating the launch of DayJet, a start-up airline that will use a new line of "very small jets" to whisk one to three business passengers around the state. Scheduled to launch later this month or early September, DayJet hopes its business model will popularize per-seat, "on-demand" executive air travel and expand elsewhere. Some observers, however, fear it could end up a great idea that didn't work.

"I see DayJet as an opportunity for a business our size to have access to jet travel on demand to meet a client when we need to meet a client," said Paul-Hus, vice president of business development for Fort Lauderdale-based HyPower Inc. "I would not be at the mercy of commercial scheduling, where I may have to fly to an airport 50 miles or 100 miles away from my final destination."

DayJet will offer single seats for business travelers who have appointments or meetings in or near Boca Raton, Gainesville, Lakeland, Pensacola and Tallahassee -- cities where air service is lacking and that

traditionally have been driving destinations.

The centerpiece of its business model is the new Eclipse 500 jet, which goes up to 425 mph and can get to Lakeland from Boca Raton in about 35 minutes, compared with three hours by car. Airline trade magazines and other observers are tracking its progress, partially as a referendum on the performance and viability of the Eclipse 500. The jet's speed allows DayJet to lure clients with the proposition that they can travel to their meeting and be home the same day.

DayJet CEO Ed Iacobucci wants to have 50 Eclipse 500 jets operating by the end of the year, and people such as Mayor John Fretti of Valdosta, Ga., are eager to see whether DayJet does well enough to move into other small airports in Florida and the Southeast.

Companies who sign up with DayJet enter the company's Web site, which has no set itinerary or pricing. Instead, users input their cities of origin and destination and the time they want to depart and arrive. Users also input how much time they need to complete their trip, and the company's computers then decide the flight's price.

A one-way flight from Boca Raton to Gainesville, with a two-hour window for DayJet to complete the trip, would cost about \$854. Such a scenario would apply to someone who needs to leave Boca by 8 a.m. and get to Gainesville by 10 a.m.

With a more flexible four-hour travel window, the one-way price would drop to about \$458. With six hours, it's about \$331. On its Web site, DayJet promises a maximum 30-minute wait.

One of the beneficiaries of DayJet's service could be the cities that have had thin air service, such as Gainesville. DayJet is bringing 16 jobs to Gainesville's airport, said Brent Christensen, the Chamber of Commerce president in the college town of about 100,000 people.

"We see this as helping us address a need and a weakness," Christensen said. "The opportunity for us to really be looked at as a strong economic-development community is to be able to travel to and from places in the Southeast."

Some wonder whether the flights will be too expensive and DayJet will be able to manage costs to turn a profit and operate long-term. Also, with new aircraft come questions on maintenance and reliability.

"Can you make any money in this business, and how much are you going to have to charge to be able to make money, and are there enough people willing to make this kind of financial commitment?" travel consultant Bob Harrell asked.

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