

Railway's charter flights put business travel on new track

Air Efficiency

BRAD WILLIAMS
business@knews.com
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Gulf & Ohio Railways Chairman Pete Claussen knew a lot about railroads and a little about planes. Bill Ross, who's been into flying since he returned from the Vietnam War, knew a lot about flying and a little about railroads.

Together, they're giving business travelers a valuable convenience: efficient air travel in a new business spawned by Claussen's short-line railroad operation.

Gulf & Ohio Airways offers charter flights based out of Knoxville's TAC Air hangars at McGhee Tyson Airport. G&O invested in a plane to fly employees to regional airports near the railroad company's short lines. The private plane can land at small airports, avoiding long drives and connections at large hubs. Within a year, the Beechcraft King Air 350 nine-passenger plane began earning its keep by chartering to other businesses when it wasn't in use.

Between the railroad company's trips and charters, Ross is a busy pilot.

"Sometimes it's every day, and sometimes you may only do like three a week," he said.

For \$1,500 per flight hour, G&O can take clients from Knoxville to any of the 5,400 airports in the country. For overnight stays, the customer also pays for the hotel, meals and rental car of the flight crew.

Ross says the schedule stays in the hands of the customer.

"You can get four or five meetings done in one day and be back home that night," Ross said, estimating that about 100 customers, including Y-12 employees and doctors' groups, have used the charter service.

The University of Tennessee Medical Center occasionally sends patients to the Mayo Clinic aboard G&O.

Ed Jesup, vice president of sales and marketing for Case Cutlery, recently returned from a trip.

"The reason that I charter for the most part is it's the most efficient use of time and you just do not go through any frustration," Jesup said.

All G&O flights are direct, without check-in, baggage claim or paying for parking.

"I walk straight in within minutes I'm on the airplane," Jesup said. "The plane works on my schedule, and most business meetings that I have, with this plane I'm able to fly up in time for the meeting and fly back, without the necessity of hotel rooms."

Jesup said he doesn't worry about losing important luggage like his presentation materials.

G&O can serve those with critically tight schedules.

"Time is our biggest resource," says Fred Marcum, senior adviser to former senator Howard H. Baker. "We can't maintain (Baker's) schedule without private aircraft." Baker has his own aircraft, but when it's down for maintenance, they call Ross and his crew.

Because Baker was once chairman of Cherokee Aviation, TAC Air's predecessor, Marcum says, "We knew the crew. We knew the aircraft. When you climb onto an airplane, you want to know that it's maintained and crewed professionally."

Marcum says they use G&O about four times a year, and it's not always because their plane is being worked on.

"If we need to carry more people than our plane can hold, the default choice is always G&O," Marcum said.

Ross says the KingAir turboprop has a crew of two.

"We're really the only cabin-class charter there is in Knoxville," Ross said, adding that during the pre-flight briefing, guests are shown where to find coffee, drinks, snacks and other comforts.

"If they want total privacy, we can close the cabin doors," Ross said.

Folding desks and laptop plug-ins make travel time productive for Jesup.

"Usually I'll take three or four people to meetings," he said. "We hook our computers up shortly after we take off. They have an inverter so we can use (alternating current) on the plane." Noise-canceling equipment helps them talk.

Jesup said safety is also a priority.

"If you don't know your diamonds, you better know your diamond cutter," Jesup said. "I know these guys. The crew has a tremendous amount of experience."

Randall Honea, general manager of TAC Air, called G&O the "only full-blown charter" based in Knoxville.

Though other local companies have corporate planes at TAC Air, they fly exclusively for company business. Some simply don't have the time.

Pilot Corp., which operates in more than 40 states, also has corporate planes, but they aren't for charter. Pilot's planes are used too frequently for Pilot business to be available for charter, a company spokesman said.

Starting a charter service isn't as simple as having a plane, either.

The charter business is growing so fast, G&O has considered buying another KingAir 350.

"I see the charter business getting better and better and better," Ross said.

