

# Walla Walla air travel zooms to new heights



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**Published by Walla Walla Union Bulletin**

- As of Thursday, January 7, 2016

Last year was the biggest for commercial air travel in Walla Walla, and not by a little.

Commercial air passenger numbers at the Walla Walla Regional Airport were poised to surpass the 40,000 mark for the first time in history, but then ended up burying that by another 1,000 passengers, the end-of-year numbers show.

A total of 41,259 passengers flew out of the airport in 2015. That figure is up 13.7 percent from 2014.

Even slightly more passengers — 41,277, flew into Walla Walla in 2015. That was also up 13.7 percent for the year.

The final month closed out with 3,800 outbound passengers, the highest number for a December. Inbound numbers were also for the books with 3,574 people flying into town during the month.

The average load factor for all flights was 80.47 percent, meaning that percentage of seats on each flight was occupied. That figure is one the airline watches when measuring profitability.

The numbers are not only reflective of growth in the local air traffic, they also continue a now three-year trend with inbound travel outpacing outgoing passengers at a time when carrier Alaska Airlines leads legacy carriers with traffic growth and air travel prices overall reportedly improve.

Investment information company Market Realist reports Walla Walla's commercial carrier Alaska far outpaced United Continental, American Airlines and Delta Air Lines in traffic growth.

The Seattle based carrier saw traffic improve by 9.2 percent between November 2014 and November 2015 while its competitors experienced anywhere from 2.5 percent to 4 percent growth during the same time frame.

Market Realist attributed the success to constant efforts to expand in newer markets and reach favorable tourism destinations.

The airline will expand its Walla Walla service in March with a third flight four days a week. The airline's daily flight schedule provides round trips between Walla Walla and Seattle, where passengers can connect to other destinations.

The new schedule is expected to debut March 13.

Despite consumer perceptions, air travel sources report drops in travel prices over the last year.

Travel site Expedia ended the year with a report of an 8 percent price drop in economy-class air travel from 2014 to 2015. Some individual months — July and August, for instance — saw double digit decreases of 13 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

That data was backed by daily travel and tourism news site Travel Daily News and coverage of the second annual "Preparing for Takeoff: Air travel outlook for 2015."

Walla Walla Regional Airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund said she hopes to get further study on who is traveling at the airport and why. Though business travel has long been an anchor of local numbers, she believes tourism is gaining ground.

Visit Walla Walla Executive Director Ron Peck said the last consumer survey in 2013 showed strides in the number of visitors coming to Walla Walla by air.

During that survey, 15 percent of visitors said they'd flown in. That was an increase from the previous survey in 2009, when 9 percent said they came by air.

Anecdotally, Peck said his office has been told by Alaska that many air travelers use the Taste and Tote program, the campaign that allows passengers to check one case of wine free on Alaska flights. The local number of those using the service is estimated at double the amount at other participating airports in Yakima and the Tri-Cities, Peck said.

Skoglund said air travel from Walla Walla between 2010 and 2015 has grown 20 percent.

In the years before that the community had a three-flight schedule but not as many users. Narrowing down the demand will be a factor in sustaining the growth, she said.