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United, Continental merger could benefit Valley airports

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By JAZMINE ULLOA, The Brownsville Herald

Rio Grande Valley airport officials said they welcome the \$3 billion-plus merger agreement between United and Continental airlines that would establish the largest air carrier in the world.

The alliance, which the companies announced Monday, would create a new parent company, United Continental Holdings Inc., which would provide air service to 370 destinations in 59 countries. While it is too early to tell how the deal will affect jobs and the number of flights at Valley airports, officials said the new United is overall good news for travelers.

"Passengers will now have a stronger carrier with 40 percent more destinations," said Jose Mulet, marketing director for Valley International Airport in Harlingen. Mulet said the airport has not been advised of added flights but was looking into changing the current Continental logos on their counters and podium to reflect the new company's redesign.

In Brownsville, the merger could have a deeper impact, as airport officials at the Brownsville/South Padre International Airport are discussing providing nonstop flights to Chicago, said Michael D. Jones, director of marketing for the airport.

Jones is planning to meet with members of the national Air Service Development Program next month to seek permission to create the new air route. If approved, the 2 1/2-hour flight would be daily, with one departure in the morning and another at night.

Airport officials had been working to establish nonstop air service to the city even before the two airlines merged because of demand for it, particularly from business travelers in the maquiladora industry, Jones said. Chicago is among the top three national destinations for people flying out of Brownsville, following Dallas/Fort Worth at number two and Houston at number one, Jones said.

But the alliance will now make it easier for the airport to provide the flight, boosting chances for its approval. That's because United Air, which would supply the aircraft, would not have to establish itself in the Valley, but rather would simply work through Continental, which already provides service to Brownsville/SPI International, Jones said. That also could allow the airport to offer the flight as early as the fall, he said.

The merger also affects which aircraft United would bring to the Valley to provide the Chicago flight.

So far on the list are an extended-range regional jet that can seat up to 50 passengers, or one of United Air's larger airplanes — a CRJ-700, which can provide 14 first-class passenger seats and 62 coach seats; or an Embraer 170, which can seat about 90 people, including more than a dozen first-class passengers.

The new air service also would stimulate new jobs in the Brownsville area, Jones said, citing a study by faculty at the University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College School of Business.

One domestic flight in the Brownsville area brings in more than \$2 million to the area's economy, creates more than 200 permanent jobs and brings in more than \$350,000 in sales tax revenue, the study found.

While the alliance between United and Continental could hurt jobs at the corporate level, Jones said, "at this station, there is a possibility for job growth."

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Brad Doherty/The Brownsville Herald
 Continental Airlines sales agent Diana Pietre catches up on paperwork between flights Monday at Brownsville/South Padre Island International Airport. United Airlines and Continental announced Monday that they intend to merge.

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