

## **Pensacola rep questions Southwest Airlines in Okaloosa**

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NAVARRE — The Pensacola Bay Area Chamber of Commerce does not consider Northwest Florida Regional Airport to be much of a threat in the battle over Southwest Airlines.

Charles Wood, senior vice president of economic development for the Pensacola chamber, was a guest speaker at Friday's breakfast meeting of the Navarre Beach Area Chamber of Commerce. Wood talked about the steps Pensacola and Panama City's airports have taken to attract Southwest, but he did not mention Northwest Florida Regional as a serious contender.

"I don't know (if Northwest Florida Regional is an option)," Wood said after the meeting. "I certainly know Panama City is working hard on it."

The only time Wood mentioned Northwest Florida Regional at the meeting was to compare its size to Pensacola-Gulf Coast Regional Airport. Wood said more flights arrive and leave Pensacola than from Northwest Florida Regional and Mobile's airport combined.

Joe Fagundes, who has led efforts to bring Southwest to Northwest Florida Regional, said he has talked to the same Southwest representatives as Pensacola supporters, despite Wood implying that Okaloosa County is not being considered.

"Their opinion of what goes on over here has been pretty inaccurate," Fagundes said. "It's up to us to present our case, not them."

When selecting a new airport, Southwest typically requires local incentives. Southwest has stated it intends to offer service out of Northwest Florida, and the three airports in the area are competing to offer the best deal to use their terminal.

Northwest Florida Regional's inducement package includes pledges from more than 400 individuals and business owners to donate money or in-kind services to Southwest. Other "out of the box" ideas have not been announced.

"It continues to grow on a daily basis, so we update them and let them know what changes we have made," Fagundes said.

The Pensacola chamber has launched a campaign to have supporters pre-pay their airfares through a \$2 million travel bank. Wood said they have received between 500 and 1,000 pledges so far. It also has been reported that St. Joe Co., which donated 4,000 acres for the Panama City-Bay County International Airport now under construction, had agreed to donate \$10 million to entice Southwest there when the airport opens next May.

Cindy Anderson, executive director of the TEAM Santa Rosa Economic Development Council, was the main speaker at Friday's breakfast. She invited Wood to speak for the Pensacola airport. Anderson also did not mention Northwest Florida Regional until after the meeting was over.

"We are looking at regional support and Fort Walton Beach is also in the game," Anderson said.