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Santa Rosa wants to help lure Southwest

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Santa Rosa County is considering sweetening the pot to help bring Southwest Airlines to Northwest Florida.

County Commissioner Gordon Goodin, who chairs the commission's Economic Development Committee, said the county's Tourist Development Council wants to support bringing the discount carrier to either the Pensacola or Fort Walton Beach airports.

"In Santa Rosa County, we're midway between both airports," Goodin said. "In either case, Santa Rosa County will benefit."

Pensacola and Fort Walton Beach are in competition with the new Panama City airport to lure Southwest.

The tourist council has recommended:

- Allocating up to \$200,000 each year in so-called "bed tax" revenue to advertise in markets. That would require the county to impose a fifth percent tax on short-term stays in hotels, condominiums and campgrounds.
- Setting aside \$250,000 in an "economic development" grant to help pay for infrastructure costs at whichever airport is picked, with half coming from the tourist council and half from the TEAM Santa Rosa Economic Development Council.
- Hotel owners purchase Southwest gift cards and donate hotel stays for airline crew members.

"All of the incentives are contingent on Southwest coming here," Goodin said.

Commissioner Lane Lynchard said he'd have to have more information about the proposal before making a decision.

He wants to know what impact Southwest's presence might have on other carriers and how the TEAM Santa Rosa side of the economic development grant would impact the county budget, since TEAM is funded with county money.

Commission Chairman Don Salter said while he would like to hear those answers, too, "I think it's going to be great for this region."

Increasing the bed tax to 5 percent would take an advertised public hearing and vote of the county commission.

The commission will discuss the proposal further and possibly vote on a letter of support for Southwest at Thursday's regular commission meeting.