

# PANAMA CITY NEWS HERALD



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## Southwest names destination cities



Airport Authority Chairman Joe Tannehill, far left, and Bob Montgomery, Southwest Airlines vice president of properties, hold a celebratory umbrella drink during the Southwest Airlines announcement Wednesday at Breakers Restaurant in Panama City Beach.

### Airline will fly nonstop to Houston, Nashville, Baltimore, Orlando

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**PANAMA CITY BEACH** — With a celebratory umbrella drink aloft, Airport Authority Chairman Joe Tannehill on Wednesday said the airport board was excited about the announcement from Southwest Airlines.

"This group of guys right here," he said, asking the entire board to join him on stage at Breakers, "we never thought we would not win. We are winning."

Southwest Airlines announced Wednesday that, beginning in May, Northwest Florida residents will be able to fly nonstop to Orlando, Nashville, Tenn., Baltimore and Houston from the new airport under construction near West Bay.



**BOB MONTGOMERY**  
Southwest Airlines vice president of properties

Bob Montgomery, Southwest vice president of properties, said during a press conference fares will begin as low as \$49 when Southwest starts operating two flights per day from each destination May 23. Introductory rates last through Friday and can be accessed at [www.southwest.com](http://www.southwest.com).

The four cities will give local flyers and potential tourists "direct or connecting flights" to and from the new Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport (ECP), scheduled to open May 18, and at least 58 other Southwest "gateway" cities, Montgomery said, including the West Coast.

"We've tried to pick our finest," Montgomery said. He said the new flights had the potential to serve 2,000 travelers per day. "It's hard to believe and very exciting for us," he said.

Southwest spokeswoman Christi Day said the



Beach balls with the Southwest logo were on hand at Breakers on Wednesday.

### Officials say Southwest's direct flights to boost hubs, Panhandle

By SCARLET SIMS  
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**WEST BAY** — Southwest Airlines' decision to fly from Bay County directly to Houston, Nashville, Tenn., Orlando and Baltimore-Washington International means more tourism, more business and more economic growth, city leaders say.

"Economic development follows wherever Southwest goes," said Jeff Hite, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce business recruitment director.

Nashville benefited when Southwest became its low-cost carrier in the

#### ON THE WEB

For a photo gallery from the Southwest announcement and a link to book your flight, visit [newsherald.com](http://newsherald.com).

mid-1980s. The company is known to hire locally and offer an upbeat, customer-friendly atmosphere. Panama City is sure to see benefits, just as Nashville did, Hite said.

With direct flights to the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, Nashville likely will see more tourism, which means a boost to the country-music capital's tourism industry, Hite

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four new nonstop destinations were chosen to draw visitors from areas already partial to visiting Panama City Beach. In addition, the cities are positioned strategically to open up markets for Northwest Florida in other portions of the country.

"We go where we know there will be traffic," she said.

For instance, Southwest currently has 157 daily flights to 41 cities from Baltimore (BWI), which also serves the Washington, D.C., market. More than 2,500 Southwest employees are based at BWI.

In addition, Orlando and

Baltimore are "international gateways" for foreign travelers, said Dan Rowe, executive director of the Bay County Tourist Development Council. Airport officials repeatedly have said that one goal of the new \$318 million airport was to market Northwest Florida to international vacationers.

"Orlando is one of the top international designations on the planet," Rowe said. "Now they can tie in a beach vacation to their visit to Disney."

Danielle Courtenay, spokeswoman for the Orlando/Orange County

Convention & Visitors Bureau, said international travelers make up about 6 percent of air traffic at the Orlando airport (MCO).

Airport board member Rick Koehnemann said the announcement "pushes the airport two or three years farther down the road than it might have been. This kind of jump-starts our airport."

Koehnemann said travelers will be able to fly "direct" — without having to change planes — to Chicago through Nashville (BNA), New York through Baltimore, Dallas through Houston (HOU) and Fort

Lauderdale through Orlando. This opens up huge areas of the country to affordable weekend visits, he said. Chicago to Panama City, with a stop in Nashville, takes about three hours.

"You get four direct flights and four semi-direct flights," he said. "This is really bigger than it appears. Not only is the business community excited, but also all the people who might want their grandchildren to come visit."

Sonny Mares, executive director of the Beaches of South Walton Tourist Development Council, also hailed Southwest's announcement.

"One great location for us is Baltimore, not only for consumers, but that's the nation's headquarters for convention and meeting associations. Being able to show them we've got good flights in this area will really help increase group meeting business."

Bay Defense Alliance President Tom Neubauer said he was looking forward to having the Baltimore-Washington route available. He said the flights likely would be used extensively by defense contractors going to and from the nation's capital.

He also singled out the Orlando flights as a welcome

addition for area residents.

"I think Orlando is great. I'm glad to have them back," Neubauer said, noting the new Southwest routes could force down air fares across Northwest Florida. Delta Connection used to fly between here and Orlando.

Rowe said the TDC's new public relations firm began Wednesday "blanketing" the cities' media with press releases, photos, video and other material about Panama City Beach.

Rowe said he was hoping newspapers along the new routes would profile Panama City Beach in a Sunday travel section, for instance.

Mares said his TDC's research indicates there are more than 3 million households in the four markets chosen by Southwest "that fit our profile" of the type of people who come to the area.

"We have a chance to make dramatic increases in our business," he said.

Through Friday, special introductory fares for flights beginning May 23 start at \$49 to Orlando and \$69 to Houston, Nashville and Baltimore, Day said. Prices will fluctuate later, but Southwest fares typically are as low as 50 percent off competitors', Day said.

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said. About 10 million people a year visit Nashville, but the city hopes to capture a few companies that want to locate an office in Nashville for quick access to the Panhandle area, Hite said.

"The more awareness of transportation between the two, the better for both," Hite said.

Bay County real estate also might pick up as more Nashville residents look for vacation homes and investments, said Mike Nichols, Greater Nashville Association of Realtors president. For years, Panama City and Destin have been hot-spot, vacation destinations for Nashville residents, but Southwest is opening the market for quick and affordable access, Hite said.

For instance, Delta Air Lines, which also serves Panama City, will keep its fares competitive, said Susan Elliott, Delta spokeswoman. Delta's holiday airfare starts at \$69 to Baltimore, according to the carrier's Web site. Southwest also is offering \$69 fares to Baltimore, if booked by Friday.

Affordable access might translate to more real estate sales and, eventually, higher housing prices as people snap up real estate along the Panhandle. The more people notice Bay County, the better off the real estate market will be, Hieman said.

"There is a greater sense of optimism in the marketplace," said Darren Haiman, Bay County Association of Realtors president-elect. "As demand increases and the supply remains, prices will go up."

Sales have improved, but Hieman could not say how much of that is linked to Southwest's plans to be the local low-cost carrier.

Other hubs see benefits to direct flights to Panama City, too.

Northwest Florida's goal to be a part of the next aerospace corridor could benefit from a direct flight to Houston, said Jorge Franz, Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau tourism vice president. Aerospace engineering is a large industry in Houston, he said. Until the corridor develops, tourism likely will be a big draw for families, Franz said.

"Any new flight — we look at it as potential," Franz said. "Any new thing to the city is a good thing for us."

Houston was among Southwest's first airports it served in 1971, and the city has seen growth because of the carrier. Houston is the fourth largest city in the U.S. and an energy business hub, Franz said.

"Houston is already a renowned hub for the Gulf Coast, and this important addition of the Florida Panhandle serves as an air bridge to create even more jobs and growth opportunities," Greater Houston Partnership President and CEO Jeff Moseley wrote Wednesday in an e-mail. "Christmas has come early, and Southwest Airlines has brought us a present — that we're excited to open — by announcing this nonstop flight that gives Houston and Panama City more opportunities to grow business."

In Orlando, vacationers might stay longer, said Danielle Courtenay, spokeswoman for the Orlando/Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau Inc. Most of Orlando's visitors are Floridians, she said. Tourism brings the Orlando-area economy \$30 billion a year, Courtenay said.

"Making sure we are accessible to the world is always going to be very positive on our destination," Courtenay said.