

The Jet Set scales down

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They weigh as much as a minivan and can fly at jet speed using suburban airstrips, including ones in Creve Coeur and Bethalto.

A new breed of relatively inexpensive aircraft - "very light jets," or VLJs for short - is expected to go into production this year. They will open up 5,400 suburban and rural airports around the country to jet travel.

Well-heeled St. Louisans who need to get to Falls City, Neb., but are leery of turboprops will have another option - and it's not a renting a car in Omaha, Neb.

The VLJs can land on 3,000-foot runways that now accommodate only propeller aircraft. That will make flying to suburban Chicago possible without setting foot in Lambert Field or O'Hare International. The same is true for non-stop flights to rural outposts where there's no commercial service.

"It's really difficult going to Lambert to take a flight to Ponca City, Okla.," said Doug Clements, executive director of Wings of Hope, a Chesterfield-based charity. "You have to fly to Tulsa or Oklahoma City and then figure out how to get there. The same applies to 1,000 other cities that same size."

But first, you need the cash to buy a jet. Or, at the very least, you need several thousand dollars to charter one.

The small jets start at about \$1 million, less than half the price of the most inexpensive ones in production today. Operating costs range from roughly \$250 to \$730 an hour, depending on the model. This opens up jet ownership to a class of people who historically could afford first-class airfare but not own their own jets.

"It's going to open up that niche that's not filled right now," said Bob McDaniel, director of St. Louis Downtown Airport in Cahokia. "A lot of those small- to mid-size companies that right now send people by way of airlines will find light jets are very comparable in price."

Production of a new kind of jet normally causes barely a ripple outside aviation circles. But the possibility of being able to fly to thousands of under-used airports in the country has some frequent business fliers talking breathlessly about the future.

"This is going to revolutionize small-business travel," said Carmen Natoli, owner of Natoli Engineering in St. Charles. He has ordered five jets. Three of

them he's selling locally. He's keeping two for his company so he can more easily fly to meetings in California, Texas and Puerto Rico.

About 3,000 of the VLJs are on back-order at three of the companies that expect to start delivering this year. Most of those orders are for the Eclipse 500, produced by Eclipse Aviation in Albuquerque, N.M. Cessna Aircraft Co. of Wichita, Kan., and Adam Aircraft Inc. of suburban Denver also have similar models planned for production.

The jets still need certification from the Federal Aviation Administration. And before flying one, a pilot must have special training.

Some air-charter companies are ordering VLJs to begin on-demand air-taxi service, or add to existing charter fleets, in states including Florida and North Dakota.

Linear Air Corp., an air-charter service in Lexington, Mass., has 30 of the small jets on order from Eclipse and expects them to arrive this fall.

On-demand taxi service would cost \$850 per flight hour - the same price the company charges to charter a turboprop, said William Herp, president and chief executive of Linear. Though operating costs are comparable, the VLJs fly twice the speed, and Herp believes they'll have more appeal.

No one has announced plans to buy a fleet of the small jets for a taxi service in the St. Louis area. Linear has plans to expand to California next year, Herp said, and carry passengers to secondary and tertiary markets within 500 miles of those cities. Herp said he hopes to expand to the Midwest - and possibly to the St. Louis market - before the end of the decade.

"It is coming. It's just a matter of timing," said Dennis Bampton, owner of St. Charles Flying Service. He has no plans to expand into a small-jet charter service - his company mostly flies cargo. But, he said, "I'm sure there's a market for it."

Federal Aviation Administration forecasters predict that 4,000 very light jets could be in use by 2016. NASA puts the number much higher, at 5,000 by 2010.

Airline pilots are concerned that VLJs could cramp already crowded skies, potentially over-extending air-traffic controllers.

"A small jet carrying four business executives takes up just as much capacity in the air traffic control system as a large commercial plane," said John Mazor, spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association. "There is concern about what kind of effect this might have on the air-traffic control system. It has to be fixed somehow."

The FAA is developing a more flexible air-traffic system that could accommodate three times the number of flights in operation today, said Elizabeth Isham Cory, spokeswoman for the agency. "We don't expect any over-taxing of the air traffic system," she said, adding that the system will require long-term federal investment.

Another local VLJ buyer is Bob O'Loughlin, president and chief executive of Lodging Hospitality Management in Westport. American Airlines' cutbacks at Lambert Field made it difficult for him and others in his company to reach out-of-state meetings on time. He became weary of flying through congested hubs to get to cities such as Colorado Springs, Colo., he said.

"It led me to look into the Eclipse," O'Loughlin said.

He plans to store his jet at a hangar at Spirit of St. Louis Airport in Chesterfield. Natoli, meanwhile, bought a hangar there and plans to remodel it this year to hold five or six small jets.

"We're all ready for it," said Richard Hrabko, director of Spirit Airport.