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By Karen Di Piazza [CharterX Exclusive]

Air Taxi Linear Air Successful Without Eclipse VLJs

Linear Air, based at Laurence G. Hanscom Field (BED), located in Bedford, Mass., is a successful player in the air-taxi charter marketplace. The company provides point-to-point air travel with a fleet of four luxury Cessna Grand Caravans to more than 500 cities. This week, the company will take delivery of its fifth Caravan. The eight-passenger plane operated by a two-pilot crew, also has a lavatory with a privacy curtain.

Meanwhile, the French government granted the operator certification to offer charter flights to the French West Indies. Expansion to the French West Indies--part of two French overseas departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique, includes Saint-Barthélemy [known as Saint Barts, Saint Barths or Saint Barth], located in the Caribbean among the Leeward Islands. Using its fleet of newer Caravans, Linear Air made two trips to Saint Barts in February.

Saint Barts, considered a playground for the rich and famous, known for its pristine beaches, gourmet dining and high-end designer shopping, where its landscape demands a smaller aircraft due to mountainous terrain and shorter runways, is a perfect fit for smaller aircraft. Linear Air secured \$2.5 million in funding from European private equity firm COFRA Group, to expand its air-taxi operations.

The company has raised an additional \$3.5 million for air-taxi service using Eclipse 500 very light jets. Linear Air has positions on 30 E500s, which will seat four passengers and will be operated by a two-pilot crew. The E500s will have a lavatory with a privacy curtain.

After CharterX broke the story on Feb. 23 that Eclipse Aviation Corp. and its avionics supplier Avidyne Corp. are having a meltdown, Linear Air president and CEO William Herp said he's optimistic the Albuquerque, N.M.-based airframer will succeed in delivering its aircraft. When Herp was asked if he's invested in other VLJs--to be on the safe side, he replied no. "Eclipse is the only game in town in terms of economics and plans for air-taxi after market support," he said. "For instance, Eclipse is on schedule to open its Albany, N.Y. service center in July."

Herp realizes that it's unlikely that his company will receive its first E500 by April, as he was hopeful for. Although Eclipse's third attitude heading reference system [AHRS] is a couple of months away from being functional for FAR Part 135 operations, Herp continues his belief that investing into Eclipse's planes makes sense. He said he has faith Eclipse will get this situation under control; he also believes Eclipse will obtain its production certificate in the near future. Eclipse, however, will not comment when it expects to have its PC.

He said Linear Air anticipates taking delivery of six Eclipses by year-end 2007, and hopes the second delivery will happen in the second quarter. He said 12 pilots will be needed to operate six E500s. As soon as Eclipse's type rating pilot training program can be offered, Herp said each pilot-in-command would attend Eclipse's pilot training,

while each copilot would receive in-house flight and ground training from Linear Air. The FAA has received Linear Air's training program, which is under review, says Herp. As for the Eclipse 500 flying into Saint Barts, Herp says, "We don't plan to take the Eclipse into Saint Barts anytime soon. Initially we plan to restrict ourselves to 4,000-foot runways, down to minimum 3,000-foot runways--with a more involved internal approval procedure. E500s will service our existing clientele in regional and metropolitan areas.