

FAIRFIELD COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Wing and a plan

By: John Golden

A 4-year-old Massachusetts company with ambitious plans to expand its share of the nation's \$500-million private air-taxi market with a fleet of very light jets last week launched service with two of those aircraft at Westchester County Airport.

Based in Concord, Mass., Linear Air will operate its three-passenger Eclipse 500 jets, part of a new class of lightweight, fuel-efficient jets known as VLJ, from the Million Air fixed-base-operator facilities at the county airport. The air-taxi charter company already flies business and leisure travelers from its Westchester base in an eight-passenger Cessna Grand Caravan turboprop. Linear, which also operates from a Bedford, Mass., base, provides point-to-point air taxi service primarily along the East Coast and in eastern Canada.

Linear Air's founding President and CEO William E. Herp said the twin-engine Eclipse jet costs about \$2 million, about half the price of the previous generation of small light jet such as the Lear and Citation. With a very high thrust-to-weight ratio, the VLJ craft burns about half the fuel of those older private-service jets, he said. It has a cruising speed of 350 miles per hour and maximum fuel range of 1,000 miles, compared to 180 miles per hour and 600 miles for the Cessna Grand Caravan.

Herp said the total fare for two or three passengers on the Eclipse is about 40 percent less than the same travel on the previous class of small jets. The cost of the air-taxi service is from 10 percent to 20 percent more than typical fares on a commercial airline for the same route, he said, while private-jet travelers avoid the security lines and other time delays and "hassles" of commercial air travel.

"These new jets are going to suddenly put business travel into the hands of a large number of people who couldn't previously afford it," Herp said.

"So far in the second quarter, our business is up 90 percent over last year," with a large number of repeat purchasers, Herp said. Historically, business travelers have accounted for 30 percent of the charter business while leisure travelers, many of whom use Linear's service to Nantucket, Mass., made up 70 percent. But that ratio "is beginning to flip" as Eclipse jets are added to the company fleet, the CEO said. "It's about 50-50 for the Boston area" now as the Eclipse becomes "the preferred platform for business travel."

Herp said most of the company's business customers represent small- to medium-sized businesses "where the decision-maker for travel is also the traveler." For the most part, larger enterprises are still booking commercial airline seats for their employees. "We need to do some education" on the changing market for private air travel, he said.

Herp said Linear Air is looking to raise \$10 million in institutional funds by the end of this year. "That will allow us to roll out more Eclipses," about 12 of which the company wants to add to its current fleet of five jets and eight turboprops in the next six quarters.

The company's five-year plan is to have 300 aircraft in service. At that point, "We expect we'll be nationwide," Herp said.