

# Air service task force seeks more flights

By Bob Gross

Staff reporter

A task force looking at Sheridan airline service would like the management of Great Lakes Airlines to come here to discuss more flights.

And, if that's not possible, task force Co-chairmen Bruce Garber, president of Century 21 BHJ Realty Inc., and Paul Wallop, owner of Canyon Ranch Lodge in Big Horn, will go to Cheyenne to speak with Great Lakes CEO Chuck Howell and company founder Doug Voss.

The Forward Sheridan task force, which includes government, business and community leaders, met Wednesday in Sheridan.

The group also decided to contact aviation consultant The Boyd Group of Evergreen, Colo., to put together a program pitching the community to other air carriers.

The community is down to a single air carrier after Big Sky Airlines pulled out of Sheridan on Jan. 7.

Big Sky had provided three daily flights to Denver and one to Billings. With the departure of the Billings-based company, Sheridan County Airport now has only three flights daily, all by Cheyenne-based

Great Lakes.

John Stopka, airport manager, said Big Sky is "gone and most of their equipment is gone." He said several former Big Sky employees have taken similar jobs with Great Lakes.

Philippe Chino, executive director of Forward Sheridan, will contact Great Lakes to set up a meeting about adding a fourth flight to Sheridan.

Stopka said his preference would be for a midmorning flight, around 10 a.m.

The community has the potential to support more flights, he said. Airport data show that revenue enplanements in 2007 totaled 21,141 — an increase of about 158 percent from 2006.

Great Lakes began service to Sheridan in May 2007, but all months last year recorded more passengers than the year earlier, including January through April when Big Sky was the only scheduled carrier.

Great Lakes is serving Sheridan with two flights using 19-passenger Beechcraft 1900 D turboprop aircraft and one flight using a 30-pas-



senger EMB 120 Brasilia turboprop.

The company had been planning to cut its service to two daily flights.

"Saturday, the flight was gone, but has been reinstated," said Stopka. "I don't know if it's going to be Brasilia or not, but we'll have the three flights."

He said Great Lakes has been having problems crewing its flights. The company recently added service to Billings from seven cities in Montana previously served by Big Sky.

"I've had conversations with them trying to get a fourth flight," said Stopka. "We really need a fourth flight ... that's where I think this (task force) could really get that point across, that this community really needs that fourth flight."

He said Great Lakes is "trying to take care of Montana, and we also need to be taken care of."

According to airport data, revenue enplanements in Sheridan exceeded 2,000 per month in June,

July, August, September and October with a high of 2,570 in July.

"We can't maintain those numbers without the fourth flight," said Stopka.

"We need to do it sooner than later so people don't get back in the habit of going back north to Billings (to catch a flight)," he said.

Chino will also contact The Boyd Group. The community has worked with the aviation consulting firm before to put together a proposal for Frontier Airlines.

Task force members noted that the company has extensive contacts within the aviation industry.

"They might be able to help us in the meantime with some of the issues with Great Lakes," said Garber.

"They know what's going on and what all the people who might service us are looking at," added Wallop.

Hiring the company would require action both by the Sheridan County board of commissioners and the City Council, said Chino, who will be getting price quotes from The Boyd Group based on six months of work with an option to renew.