

August 15, 2010

## How Land to Air Express moves more people between Mankato and Minneapolis-St. Paul

By Sara Gilbert Frederick Special to The Free Press

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- Jason Mekalson has focused on growing the Land to Air Express business since taking over day-to-day operation. John Cross



- The Land to Air Express vans carry up to 14 passengers. John Cross



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MANKATO — Jason Mekalson has had his commercial driver's license for years. When he was in college, he drove a school bus to earn extra money and then decided to keep his license current. When he needed a career change after working for Lutheran Social Service as the director of personal support services for Hennepin County for several years, he pulled that license back out to drive buses for Jefferson Lines.

But Mekalson hasn't used that license in almost two years.

Since January 2009, he has been the general manager of Land to Air Express, a shuttle service to and from the Twin Cities airport that has been operating in Mankato for three decades. That was when Charlie Zelle, who owns Jefferson Lines, bought Land to Air from Louis Boben, who had founded the business in 1983.

Zelle tapped into Mekalson's previous executive experience and handed the day-to-day responsibilities of his new business over to him. And since then, Mekalson has had too much to do to settle into the driver's seat of one of the company's seven shuttle buses.

In his first 20 months at Land to Air, Mekalson has increased the number of daily trips back and forth along Highway 169 from five to seven a day. He's added a pair of new vans to Land to Air's fleet. He's launched an online reservation center at [www.landtoairexpress.com](http://www.landtoairexpress.com) and retained an answering service to field phone calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And along the way, he's seen ridership increase year-over-year on a monthly basis.

Most of those changes came out of spending a few months listening to the customers as they were coming and going.

"People wanted an earlier shuttle leaving Mankato in the morning and a later one leaving the airport at night," Mekalson says. "We took over in January, and I started thinking about how we could tweak the schedule in the spring. By August, we decided to take the lead and add more shuttles."

But paying attention to customer requests didn't fall by the wayside after adding a 5 a.m. Mankato departure every weekday and a daily 10:30 p.m. trip home from the airport. Mekalson is still listening and still using rider feedback to shape Land to Air's services.

"I'm listening to them every day," Mekalson says. "If I pay attention to what our customers and passengers are saying, then we should be able to build the business to meet their needs nicely."

## **Moving Target**

Most Land to Air passengers travel from Mankato to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. Some drive to Mankato from points farther south — including northern Iowa — and park for a dollar a day in a neighboring lot before boarding the shuttle. Some get on the vans at points along the way — the shuttles stop in St. Peter on every route, but they will also pick up passengers in Belle Plaine or Jordan on request. Some routes also pick up at Minnesota State University and at Gustavus Adolphus College. Rides can even be arranged from a few select local hotels, including downtown Mankato's Hilton Garden Inn and City Center Hotel.

While airport traffic is Land to Air's bread-and-butter business, Mekalson says that a growing number of people also are choosing to use the shuttle service for trips to the Twin Cities for outings such as Twins games or even to commute weekly for work. "We have one professor from Minnesota State Mankato who rides down on Monday morning and then leaves on Thursday," Mekalson says. "We do have a lot of business folks who use us regularly to go back and forth."

Tapping into non-airport travelers is one of the areas where Mekalson sees the potential for growth right now, especially since the light-rail station at the airport makes getting downtown and to other destinations quite convenient. He'd also like to expand the company's charter service, which can shuttle groups to the airport, the convention center or almost any other Twin Cities destination.

"It's actually very cost effective to do a private charter if you're going as a group," he says. "We will come to your house or business, pick everyone up and then take you where you need to be. If you're flying, we'll track your flight and be there to pick you up when you get in."

### **Bus Fare**

Each Land to Air Express van carries 14 passengers. Although many weekday trips are full — and some routes require two buses to carry all the passengers — others depart with empty seats. Mekalson's hope is that when more people opt to take the shuttle, whether it's because they are environmentally friendly, cost-effective or just plain convenient, then rates might be able to decrease.

Currently, the base rate for a one-way trip is \$35 per adult passenger and for roundtrip service is \$60; different rates are available for children younger than 12 (those under 5 are free) and in other certain circumstances as well.

But Mekalson also admits he has to hold his breath when planning the annual fuel budget amid constantly fluctuating fuel prices. "You never know what's going to happen with those prices," he says, "and I do have to keep fuel in the vans."

Fair prices and on-time travel are two of the things Mekalson hasn't even thought about tinkering with since taking over at Land to Air. Those were the foundations upon which Boben built the business, he says, and those will be the guiding tenets of its future success as well.

"One of my commitments when I started was to build on the successes of this business," he says. "I didn't want to come in and turn over the apple cart."