







# Casinos place a joint bet on new air service


## Collaboration brings more gamblers to Coast

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BILOXI — It's unusual to see an airport add new service in the current economy or two competitive casinos work closely to bring tourists to the Coast.

That's what happened Wednesday when the first flight of Southern Skyways from Atlanta touched down at Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport. It is the fourth piece of new service at the airport this year and comes specifically because of collaboration between the IP Casino Resort and Grand Biloxi Casino.

The downturn in the economy makes businesses become innovative, said Jon Lucas, president of IP Casino. "You look at how to do things better and smarter." That includes joint advertising and player promotions. "You're able to share those costs. It just makes more financial sense," Lucas said.



PHOTO COURTESY GULFPORT-BILOXI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT The first flight of Southern Skyways from Atlanta touched down Wednesday at Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport. The new service is the result of a collaboration between IP Casino Resort and Grand Biloxi Casino. Southern Skyways' Web site says it utilizes three airlines to provide aircraft for its routes, including AirTran Airways,.

**STORY:** [Flight plan](#)

"The IP is closely aligned with Harrah's philosophies," said LuAnn Pappas, vice president of non-gaming and marketing for the Grand Biloxi. "Think about the two properties and how they complement each other."

IP has entertainment and more restaurants, Harrah's brings its immense database to the mix, she said, and both focus on customer service.

Customers prefer to visit two or three casinos so the Grand and IP decided not to compete for these airline customers' business.

"We transport them back and forth," she said. "We believe strongly that we need to do as much as we can to promote tourism on the Gulf Coast."

Representatives from the two casinos and the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau traveled to Atlanta to introduce the new service. They also landed in Tampa and Jacksonville, where flights to Gulfport were launched last month. At each stop they greeted travelers in the airports with giveaways and held player parties.

"It's just been amazing," said Elaine Stevens, IP Casino public relations manager. She said they were excited about finding cheap direct flights. Since AirTran discontinued service to the Coast in January, some passengers had to endure five-hour connecting flights to Atlanta.

Lucas went to all three cities to make presentations to travel agents and media.

"In these difficult times it's extremely important to find a new market like Jacksonville," he said, "and not lose an existing market."

The casinos expect it will take time to build the new flights, and they've seen the response picking up each week. The collaboration will benefit the two casinos and the Coast, he said.

"The airport authority and tourism commission were both instrumental in making this happen," Lucas said. "It is a great airport," he said, and that makes a great first impression when travelers arrive on the Coast.

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