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Ready for take-off: Rex ups ante in bid to fly Tamworth-Sydney

By Ross Tyson

REGIONAL Express (Rex) can break QantasLink's monopoly on the Tamworth-Sydney service within months, but only if council relaxes its unpopular stance over security screening charges.

The airline has told The Leader it recently expanded its fleet and has a new plane ready to fly in June that it is "willing to dedicate" to Tamworth, as long as "local conditions are favourable".

However, Tamworth Regional Council's refusal to waive an \$8.50-per-seat security charge, despite Rex's planes coming in under the mandatory screening threshold of 20 tonnes, means the chance could be lost.

Rex's general manager of network strategy and sales, Warrick Lodge, said if the council did not reassess its policy, the airline would deploy the plane to Queensland, "where there are abundant opportunities".

He said Rex flights were not screened on 80 per cent of the routes it flew on, and that in ports where QantasLink also operated, such as Mildura and Port Lincoln, the Flying Kangaroo picked up the entire tab.

"Rex will have to sacrifice prime slots at Sydney airport to operate services to Tamworth, so it must be a true partnership between Rex and council," he said.

Tamworth Regional Council general manager Paul Bennett last week said it was "absolutely" the right decision for the council to stand its ground and insist Rex share the burden for security-screening charges.

He said the council was committed to having a secure airport and an "equitable charging regime for airlines".

But Mr Lodge said it was “disingenuous” for council to claim passenger security was at the heart of its decision-making.

“If the requirement for screening of the aircraft were to be removed, would the council want to incur this million-dollar expenditure still?” he said.

“The community, the council or the state does not need to pick up the bill if Rex is not charged.”

Tony Warden flies frequently from Sydney to Tamworth and said if Rex’s entry to the route could really bring down prices by as much as half, as the airline has claimed, passengers could afford a modest security-screening surcharge.

“Even \$10 on a fare to know that everyone is safe on the plane is nothing to pay, in the overall scheme of things,” he said.

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