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If Delta disappears, AirTran could eye name, some assets

Cincinnati Business Courier -

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With a possible pilots strike threatening to kill an already bleeding Delta Air Lines, questions loom about the future of the airline and its CVG hub.

If a pilot strike forces Delta to cease operations -- and many experts think chances are slim that it will -- the airline's assets could be sold for pennies on the dollar in a liquidation.

Atlanta-based business consultant Harry Nolan, who has a new book about Delta called "Airline Without a Pilot," thinks some of Delta's routes and the brand itself could be worth something to other airlines.

He argues, in fact, that low-cost AirTran Airways, which competes head to head with Delta in Atlanta, might be a good candidate to acquire the Delta name and some of its infrastructure if Delta doesn't survive bankruptcy.

Other industry observers think Delta is more likely to merge with another major carrier, such as Continental or Northwest Airlines.

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It's unclear, though, how interested any of those airlines would be in having a presence in Cincinnati that's anywhere near as large as the presence Delta has now.

"We carry a lot of Cincinnati passengers now from Dayton through our Atlanta, Baltimore-Washington and Orlando service," said AirTran spokeswoman Judy Graham-Weaver. "We are certainly keeping an eye on the CVG market and while we do have interest in it, we do not have current plans to add the market to our route map."

Southwest Airlines has hinted that it, too, is interested in Cincinnati but isn't ready to start service. And observers don't necessarily think Delta's absence, if the airline shuts down,

would make the market any more attractive.

"Cincinnati could attract some of the low-cost guys," said Richard Gritta, a business professor and aviation expert at the University of Portland. "But if Cincinnati were that attractive to Southwest, they'd already be there."

If Delta and subsidiary Comair cease operations locally, airport insiders expect that the other airlines currently serving the airport would add flights to their own hubs. That way local travelers would still be able to get to all the same destinations, but the flights wouldn't be direct.

Experts say that kind of cut in direct service would devastate the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, where Delta operates its second-largest hub.

"For Cincinnati, it would be like Dayton," said Michael Boyd, an aviation consultant based in Colorado. "Dayton was a hub at one time; it won't be a hub again. That would be a tremendous economic hit for that area. But it won't be one that someone would rush in to fill."

The local airport has positioned itself to be attractive no matter what happens with Delta, stressed William Robinson, the airport board's chairman.



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