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Thursday, January 12, 2006

City paid airline for months after flights ended

By MIGUEL GONZALEZ/Staff Writer

VICTORVILLE — Local airport officials apparently made nearly \$200,000 in unnecessary subsidy payments to an inactive airline that once offered flights from Victorville to the Las Vegas area, and Federal Aviation

Administration officials said Wednesday they are now looking into the matter.

In order to qualify for a \$1 million annual FAA grant, Southern California Logistics Airport must have scheduled passenger flights, according to airport and FAA officials. And Valley Air Express offered those flights from November 2002 through March 2005. But when Valley Air Express halted operations in March, the airline continued receiving payments of about \$33,000 a month. Payments continued through September, amounting to about \$200,000, said SCLA Director Peter Soderquist.

Soderquist said that he kept funding Valley Air Express because he was told that they were trying to reinstate flights.

"The airline was trying to get back into service. By September, I realized that the effort to try to fly again was not there from their part, so I pulled the subsidy," Soderquist said.

Valley Air Express President Bill Delgado did not returned calls Wednesday.

Asked why he did not pull funding in March when the Airline became grounded, Soderquist explained that he was contractually obligated to keep

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subsidizing operations.

"They had difficulties since the beginning of their operations, but there are times when even the big airlines are grounded and receive funding," he said.

"This company has experienced difficulties to operate since the beginning. Part of their problem was an ineffective marketing program."

Since November of 2002, SCLA saw a yearly net gain of \$600,000, while Valley Air was funded a total of about \$1 million in taxpayer funds for the past three years.

According to the FAA, the SCLA Authority receives a yearly \$1 million federal grant.

On Wednesday, FAA officials said they will make an inquiry as to SCLA's grant status to make sure the money was used correctly.

"The money for this program is to provide scheduled services for smaller communities, but we will have to make sure all parameters were met in this case," FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown said from Washington D.C.

Soderquist said the airport has a window of two years to keep receiving the \$1 million grant. In that time, if Valley Air Express does not come back, Soderquist said SCLA will enlist another company to keep the grant.

"Heavylift Helicopters and a couple of other investors are interested if Valley Air Express does not return," Soderquist said.

Efforts to examine a copy of the contract between SCLA and Valley Air Express were unsuccessful.

Wednesday morning city spokeswoman Yvonne Hester said she would release a copy of the contract between SCLA and Valley Air Express. But later in the day City Manager Jon Roberts said through staff that the city would not release the contract and insisted the Daily Press make a written public records request.

Under state the state public records act, the city has up to 10 days to respond to written requests for information.

Roberts said he would provide a copy of the contract on Thursday with the stipulation that this story be held a day. When the Daily Press refused, Roberts and Councilman Bob Hunter canceled the offer to provide the contract.

"The city position is that there is a concern about the (Daily Press) article that ran today (Wednesday). It was deemed unprofessional and we need to act in a formal and professional way," Hester explained.

City officials took exception to one sentence in Wednesday's article that

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Victorville officials kept news of Valley Air's shutdown quiet for months until questioned by a reporter this week.

Dr. Steven Frates, a senior fellow with the Rose Institute at the Claremont McKenna College, said it seems city officials failed in monitoring Valley Air Express operations and funding.

"It sounds like a poor job in monitoring operations. The city manager should have asked more questions and demanded answers instead of letting six months pass by," he said. "The fact that the city is refusing to release a copy of the contract tells me that he is trying to soften the blow for the City Council."

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