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Virgin Australia executive tapped as D/FW Airport's new CEO



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Airport board members warned that it would be difficult to replace retiring D/FW chief executive Jeff Fegan after his nearly two decades of running one of the world's busiest airports.

The 12 members decided Thursday that they would have to reach all the way to Brisbane, Australia, to find the best candidate.

Sean Donohue, 52, has spent his career working for airlines rather than airports. But that will change in the fall when the veteran executive takes over Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Since 1984, Donohue had worked his way from accounting clerk at United Airlines in Chicago to his current job as chief operating officer of Virgin Australia.

The Massachusetts native was not at Thursday's meeting when the D/FW board voted unanimously to hire him over three other finalists, two internal and one external.

"I am honored that the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth have entrusted me with the leadership of their airport, which is in large measure responsible for the economic vitality of the region and the state," Donohue said in a written statement.

"The board, the management team and the employees of D/FW have built an inclusive culture and a record of accomplishment that creates the platform for continued innovation and success."

By email Thursday, Donohue would say only: "I'm excited about this great opportunity."

He referred interview requests to a D/FW spokesman.

His boss at Virgin Australia, CEO John Borghetti, could not be reached for comment by email.

Fegan, who announced in January that he was retiring, has agreed to remain at D/FW to assist with the transition. Donohue is expected to start work here in October.

Over the past three decades, Donohue worked in various executive positions at United and, more recently Virgin Australia.

He was vice president in charge of United's low-cost "airline within an airline," Ted, and its regional carrier, United Express.

Donohue also worked with a group that tried to privatize Chicago's Midway Airport before he was hired by Virgin's Australian operations.

'Depth and breadth'

After Thursday's vote, Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings and Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price said they didn't see a downside to hiring someone with no experience running an airport.

"Sean Donohue was the one that we decided had the best experience and brought the most to the table as a mature leader with 25 years of aviation experience," Price said.

She also mentioned his experience in international aviation and airline customer service.

Donohue's work in Australia meshes well with D/FW's recent focus on international flight expansion. The airport's 2012 strategic plan includes a vision of

“connecting the world.”

“The depth and breadth of his knowledge will push us a long way toward achieving that goal,” Price said.

Donohue also once served as United’s vice president of customer experience, which made him attractive to the board.

Rawlings said none of the candidates who reached the “final stage” of the hiring process had operated an airport. But he said Donohue’s long history as an operations executive with United — which dominated many large U.S. hubs — shouldn’t be underestimated.

“He knew airports like the back of his hand,” Rawlings said. “He knew how they needed to act to make sure their customers, the airlines, would be happy and efficient.”

‘A star for a star’

Donohue will be taking over a growing and financially thriving airport.

The board was told Thursday that the number of annual passengers at D/FW was expected to surpass 60 million for the first time since 2007. The airport is also involved in a \$2.3 billion renovation program.

Rawlings said the airport’s vigor puts additional pressure on board members not to mess up the momentum.

“It’s relatively easy at times to turn around a problem child,” Rawlings said. “This [airport] is a star. We need a star for a star.”

The hiring also received a vote of confidence from D/FW’s largest airline.

“American has been very fortunate to have Jeff Fegan at the helm of our largest hub for the last 19 years,” Kevin Cox, American Airlines’ vice president of real estate, said in an email.

“We are confident that this same business-minded partnership will continue at D/FW International Airport under the new leadership of Sean Donohue, and we look forward to working with him.”

Donohue’s salary remains to be decided in contract negotiations. Fegan’s salary this year was \$415,000.

‘Don’t you worry’

Before Thursday’s vote, airport board members were urged by a series of speakers to promote D/FW Executive Vice President Ken Buchanan. Representatives of minority chambers of commerce and minority business groups encouraged the board to hire from within and continue diversity contracting efforts.

Buchanan, who is black, is in charge of concessions, commercial development and parking and is also responsible for real estate negotiations. Price said Buchanan was one of the four finalists for the top job.

Rawlings said minority business owners should be happy with the choice of Donohue, who gives the airport its best opportunity to grow.

“If I’m a minority business person who has been doing business with Dallas/Fort Worth, I’m excited about this hire,” Rawlings said. “I think we’re going to have growth into the coming decades because of this leadership.”

Board member Bernice Washington, who is black, assured minority contractors and business groups that they would continue to have opportunities at D/FW.

“No matter who we put in that seat, this board is committed to making and maintaining D/FW in the cultural aspect and economic and business or any perspective you can think of,” she said. “Don’t you worry.”

AT A GLANCE: WHY THE AIRPORT BOARD CHOSE SEAN DONOHUE

Airport board members said they selected Sean Donohue as CEO because he had experience in key areas including:

Aviation. Donohue started as an accounting clerk with United Airlines in Chicago in 1984, then rose through the ranks, holding high-level executive positions in the last couple of decades.

Customer service. One of his positions at United was in the newly created job of vice president of customer experience. Board members said he toured airports looking for areas where customer service could be improved.

International aviation. About three years ago, Donohue was hired as an executive for Virgin Australia, where he’s worked as chief operating officer.

Knowledge of Airport operations. At United and Virgin Australia, Donohue has worked in positions that put him in close contact with airport officials. He’s also led a low-cost carrier and a regional carrier.

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