

LR airport's interim director hired for permanent position

BY NOEL E. OMAN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTEArkansas Democrat-Gazette
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Ron Mathieu can remove the interim in front of his title.

The Little Rock Municipal Airport Commission, with one of its seven members absent, voted unanimously Thursday to hire Mathieu as the next executive director of Little Rock National Airport, Adams Field.

Mathieu, 46, a veteran executive at some of the nation's largest airports, joined Little Rock National 2 1/2 years ago as deputy director. He has been interim executive director since December, after his longtime predecessor, Deborah Schwartz, resigned.

In his interim capacity, Mathieu has been responsible for all aspects of the airport's daily operation, including overseeing three ongoing property acquisitions. Mathieu has also been successful in securing additional air service, even as some flights have been cut.

"I'm really excited, I'm honored, I'm happy, I'm relieved," Mathieu said after the vote. "And now I need to turn my attention to the job at hand." His salary remains to be negotiated. He now receives an annual salary of \$153,523, the same amount Schwartz drew. Advertisements for the post listed an annual salary range of \$122,818 to \$184,228.

Mathieu was one of three candidates the commission interviewed over about three hours Thursday afternoon. The other two were Texas airport executives: James Loomis, director of aviation at Lubbock International Airport and Marv Esterly, airports director at Midland International Airport.

An executive search firm selected the three candidates and one other finalist from among 35 applicants, said Doug Kuelpman, president of ADK Executive Search of Jacksonville, Fla., which specializes in airport management. The search firm was paid \$30,000 to find candidates.

For commission members, the money was well spent, though they didn't have to look far to find the right person.

"Going through this process assures us we have the best candidate for the job," said Kay Kelley Arnold, the commission chairman. "We wanted to assure ourselves, it was a good longterm

decision. This is an important job. It was in everyone's best interest, including Ron's, to look at all the options in front of us." Other commission members agreed.

"For some [commission members], it was necessary," Dr. Carl Johnson said. "For others, it wasn't. In the end, it gives validation to Ron. Ron was a tremendous candidate. For 2 1/2 years, he demonstrated he can lead this airport into the future." Tom Schueck said Loomis and Esterly had backgrounds in the industry every bit as impressive as Mathieu's, but Mathieu's experience at Little Rock National was a bonus.

"Ron's knowledge of the airport as well as his abilities was a combination that was better than the other two candidates," Schueck said.

Said commission member Jimmy Moses: "We had a good consultant and excellent candidates for the job. But in the final analysis, we had the man for the job in our midst." Mathieu's previous experience includes time as operations director at Fort Lauderdale International Airport, where he also held two other management positions. Before then, he held management posts at LaGuardia Airport and John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York. Mathieu has also held numerous operations, supervisory and administrative positions at Teterboro and Newark airports in New Jersey, the World Trade Center and the Downtown Manhattan Heliport.

A licensed private pilot, Mathieu holds an associate degree in air commerce transportation management and a bachelor's degree in aviation management, both from the Florida Institute of Technology.

Mathieu and his wife, Yasmine, live in Little Rock with their sons Elliott, 13, and Logan, 11.

He takes the helm of the nation's 83rd-largest airport at a difficult time for the airline industry. The airlines, losing billions because of soaring [fuel prices](#), are raising fares, cutting flights and laying off thousands at a time Little Rock National is preparing to spend millions upgrading the passenger terminal and exploring the ability to handle international flights.

"We are very fortunate to have a man of Ron's caliber to direct us through these tough times," Moses said.

The airport also is in the midst of renovating several areas of the terminal: Removing from the ticket lobby the big machines used to screen baggage, adding space to the passenger checkpoints and continuing to retain and attract flights. Mathieu also is negotiating a new agreement between the airport and the airlines.

Little Rock National, which handles about 2.5 million passengers annually, has a \$30 million yearly budget and 200 employees.

For his part, Mathieu believes Little Rock National is well-positioned to weather economic turbulence. "We have a strong market. We need to continue to work with the airlines and be successful."

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