

cover story

Fly

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tions, according to Maria Sheridan, spokesperson. In those cases, though, a person or group must charter a whole aircraft.

“What’s different about Gotham Air,” she said, “is that it’s a shared charter, which is a unique situation here at Morristown Airport.”

Some 11,500 Morris County commuters work in Manhattan daily, according to TransOptions, a transportation nonprofit based in Cedar Knolls.

Statewide, the Gothamist weblog reports, some 400,000 employees commute from New Jersey to New York—more than travel between any other two states.

\$145 per trip

Those who opt to commute by helicopter from Morristown will pay \$145 per trip, if they purchase a \$3,189 one-way monthly pass. At least that’s the rate for June, a company spokesperson said. The cost is \$6,379 for a round-trip monthly pass. Prices vary, depending on the number of days in a month.

The cost may sound expensive to some, Hayes said, but not to those who face 90-minute driving commutes, daily tolls, \$50 parking fees, or even rent for a studio apartment in

the city for overnight stays.

“A lot of executives get home at 7:30 at night. By that time, they’ve missed Little League. They’ve missed soccer. They’ve missed dinner with the family,” said Hayes, a former Maplewood resident who moved to Manhattan to minimize the strain of train commutes on him and his family.

On May 21, Gotham Air also will start chopper service at Monmouth Executive Airport in Wall, from which the trip to the Downtown Manhattan Heliport takes 18 minutes and for which the cost is \$3,899 for a one-way monthly pass in June. The cost is \$7,799 for a round-trip monthly pass. That’s \$179 per trip.

While service to Morristown is being offered indefinitely, service to Wall is being offered through Labor Day weekend.

Commuters will fly on a new fleet of seven \$3 million Bell 407 choppers, according to Hayes. Most of the company’s 16 pilots have had military training. On average, each pilot has 10,000 hours of flight time.

“Safety is an incredible concern for us,” he said. “It’s in the forefront.”

Comfort is important, too.

“These are executive-class, roomy helicopters. The seats are leather,” Hayes explained. “The helicopters have a Bose noise-canceling sound



Floyd Maxson, assistant chief pilot, prepares to take off for Gotham Air’s new helicopter shuttle service for commuters at Linden Airport.

system inside and huge picture windows. The walls are almost entirely glass, so it’s a very pretty ride.”

The luxury doesn’t end at touchdown since Gotham Air headquarters, located at Pier 6 by the Downtown Manhattan Heliport, has its own private lounge for flying commuters.

Page from history

The idea of commuting in the skies, touted by some experts as evidence of economic recovery, is less an innovation and more a reprisal of a trend popular at Morristown Airport from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Back in the day, an old brochure shows, New York Airways offered

stops, all day long. It flew helicopters from Wall Street to the roof of the Pan Am Building and then to what was then Newark International Airport, LaGuardia Airport, John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK), and Morristown Airport.

The service stopped shortly after a May 16, 1977 New York Airways Sikorsky helicopter accident atop the Pan Am building, according to media reports of the day. While passengers boarded, landing gear malfunctioned, causing the helicopter to roll to one side, killing five people and seriously injuring two.

In more recent years, helicopter shuttles have appeared from time to time in American cities.

HubExpress, for instance, operated from Logan International Airport in Boston, to the city’s suburbs, starting in 1986. It ceased operations in 1991, after a recession hit.

Genesis moment

In his professional life, Hayes has straddled two worlds and, with Gotham Air, sought to meld them.

At Premier Talent Agency, Hayes routed tours for major musical acts, and during a television career at “Good Morning America,” “20/20” and ABC News, he booked helicopters for busy celebrity guests.

A year ago, he said, he was working with Duff McKagan from the band Guns N’ Roses and Velvet Revolver and the taping was going behind schedule. That was the day he started thinking about the Gotham Air concept.

“We needed Duff McKagan another 45 minutes but he had to catch a flight,” Hayes recalled. “We asked him if he could stay if we got him a helicopter. He said yes. So we booked him a helicopter. He picked it up at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport. Six minutes later, he was at Newark Liberty (International Airport). He was able to finish the project. He was able to make his flight.”

Then Hayes got the bill — \$2,200.

“It seemed like an awful lot of money for a six-minute flight,” he said.

Short hop prices

At the same time, he realized that sightseeing helicopter rides of New York, which last as long as 12 minutes, cost \$200 per ride.

“We asked ourselves, ‘Is there a way we can use the operational procedures and economics of sightseeing for short hop travel?’” Hayes said. “It turns out there is.”

Inspired by the number of passengers that use Newark and JFK airports every year, Gotham Air started flying in January, offering \$199 to \$219 flights from the Downtown Manhattan Heliport to both airports.

Two years ago, a total of 35 million passengers used Newark airport and 50 million used JFK, according to The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey 2013 Airport Traffic Report.

“The airport shuttles have been successful,” he said. “We’re very happy with those.”

The daily commuter helicopter rides — as well as weekend, summertime trips from the Downtown Manhattan Heliport to Atlantic City — are the company’s second innovation.

If the daily commuter flights from Morristown and Wall go as well as planned, Hayes said, Gotham Air intends to also offer service from Princeton Airport as well as Essex County Airport-tirfield.

Nepal

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soccer team in Kathmandu at the time of the earthquake, Doyne said. Since Internet and phone lines are down, there is no indication the student was harmed, but they have been unable to get in contact, she said.

The home and school is located in the Surkhet district of Nepal at the time of the quake, more than 370 miles west of Kathmandu and nearly 600 miles from Pokhara.

“It’s sad, devastating,” Doyne said. “There are thousand year old buildings, just gone. And I think the [fatality and injury] numbers are still going to go way, way up.”

Doyne is currently home in the United States for several weeks, working out of BlinkNow’s Morristown office while a 10-month-old orphan she cares for receives medical attention.

She is also attending BlinkNow board meetings and speaking at with several groups including Madison’s Rotary Club Thursday and Morristown’s Peck School Friday.

“Having lived in Nepal it’s the aftermath I’m really worried about,” Doyne said. “I hope for an organized relief effort. There is instability in Nepal without a natural disaster.”

Doyne said she is concerned for good friends she has not heard from in Kathmandu.

“And I’m also worried about the remote villages,” Doyne said. “It’s hard to know if they will get the same relief as the major cities.”

Doyne said she and BlinkNow have received hundreds of calls, people checking in to make sure they are safe, and she appreciates the well wishes.

Reaching out

Doyne has spent the past two days on Twitter letting people know how they can help victims and the region in the aftermath of the earthquake.

She has linked to an Indiegogo page that has raised more than \$175,000, <https://life.indiegogo.com/fundraisers/nepal-earthquake-relief-fund> and a U.S. AID page on how Americans can help, <http://www.usaid.gov/nepal->

earthquake/fy15/fs01.

Doyne also recommends the Red Cross and CARE as two organizations to donate to for relief efforts.

BlinkNow’s website

also has a list of ways to help at <http://www.blinknow.org/journal/entry/nepal-earthquake-we-are-safe>.

“The hospitals are bad before a disaster, so I’m

worried about the injured,” Doyne said. “I’m worried about water, about cholera, about a lack of communication. It will take the world pulling together to help.”

Members of BlinkNow tried to land a helicopter in Kathmandu Monday to help with relief efforts, but were unable to land, Doyne said.

Doyne said she plans to

return to Nepal to help in a few weeks.

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