

JetBlue HQ on runway?



JetBlue's inaugural flight from LaGuardia Airport takes off in September 2004. The airline is looking to move its corporate headquarters from Forest Hills, Queens. Photo by Bloomberg News

Forest Hills-based airline seeking new corporate office site, officials confirm

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QUEENS' "HOMETOWN" airline could soon be taking off — destination unknown.

Six months after opening its \$743 million Terminal 5 at Kennedy Airport, JetBlue began a search for a new corporate headquarters last week, a company official confirmed yesterday.

The move — which could come when JetBlue's Forest Hills office lease expires in 2012 — could be a major blow to the borough's economy, local leaders said.

"Losing jobs from any company would be devastating," said Jack Friedman, executive vice president of the Queens Chamber of Commerce. "But losing jobs from one of the largest employers in Queens would be that much worse."

Friedman fears unemployment could rise because local merchants depend on traffic from JetBlue's 650 or so corporate employees.

The search is still in a preliminary phase, and the airline might not even leave Queens, JetBlue spokesman Bryan Baldwin said.

But the discount airline is "looking at potential locations in the New York metropolitan area as well as outside of New York State," he said.

Some aviation experts believe that's a wise move.

"New York has become an increasingly unfriendly place to do business," said Michael Boyd, president of the Boyd Group Internation-

al, a Colorado aviation research and consulting firm.

The airline may be moving "simply to get their costs down," he said. A combination of high taxes, wages inflated for cost-of-living and steep rents make it expensive for companies to do business in the city, he said.

"To some degree, the threat to move is a message to Albany and to the City of New York to give them a better deal," Boyd said.

JetBlue declined to say where it was looking. But Orlando could be one possible candidate because JetBlue has a large training center there, an industry observer said.

Friedman said he hopes the airline is considering Jamaica. The area around the JFK AirTrain — a monorail that connects trains and subways to JFK — was rezoned in 2007 to make it more business friendly.

"We were hoping to get airlines in there for their corporate offices and training facilities," Friedman said.

Neither JetBlue nor the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., which sources said is in talks with the airline about relocating — would comment about the site.

"Even if we were to move our corporate office space outside of the region, Terminal 5 would still remain our major base of operations," Baldwin said.

Meanwhile, Southwest Airlines announced plans yesterday to expand service to and from LaGuardia Airport.