

Love

Continued from Page 1

would fall into the hands of a competing airline.

"It's something that we will grow into over the years," said airline spokeswoman Melanie Jones.

The Wright Amendment is a federal law that restricts operations at Love Field and has allowed Southwest to cultivate a monopoly on commercial airline traffic there.

Congressional opponents recently announced their intentions to seek repeal of the 14-year-old law.

Dallas City Councilman Jerry Bartos, an outspoken Wright Amendment critic who calls repeal inevitable, said Southwest appears to be "laying the groundwork for that future."

Either the airline hopes to keep out competition, Bartos speculated, or it is positioning itself to be an important broker of Love Field real estate in the new environment.

If the Wright Amendment is overturned, he said: "The value of what they have is just going to soar. I mean S-O-A-R."

The property acquired from Triton Energy includes a northern extension of the airport's main terminal building, with enough space for several airline boarding gates.

Various airlines operated there before the Wright Amendment. Although the area now is obstructed by four or five aircraft hangars, also acquired by Southwest.

Dalfort Aviation Inc. tried to purchase the lease and says it was outbid by

If the Wright Amendment is overturned, said Councilman Jerry Bartos, "The value of what they have is just going to soar. I mean S-O-A-R."

Southwest.

Dalfort facilities manager Bob Raper said the aircraft maintenance company badly needed to relieve overcrowding at its nearby complex.

Dalfort last year postponed a \$25 million expansion at Love Field because of the slump in the airline industry. Raper said the Triton property was an attractive interim alternative.

"It would have worked out beautifully for us," he said.

But Southwest had approached Triton first about the property, and the two sides

struck a deal in late January.

Raper estimated that it cost \$2.5 million to buy out Triton's lease. Lease payments to the City of Dallas probably will cost another \$250,000 a year, he said.

Raper interpreted Southwest's takeover of the site as a pre-emptive action in anticipation of Wright Amendment repeal. He said it was a wise strategic maneuver.

"If they had asked my advice, I would have told them to do the same thing," he said. "It was, probably, a lot in self-defense."

Love Field manager Danny Bruce disagreed.

Bruce said it would have been difficult for another airline to use the property as a base for launching competitive airline service. The surrounding aircraft hangars would have to be knocked down to give aircraft access to the terminal.

Besides, he said, the city controls several other boarding gates not far away that could be leased to a competing airline at any time.

Bruce said he learned about a month ago that Southwest was pursuing a deal on the Triton property.

"I knew that they needed some space," he said. "The next thing I knew, they were the owners of that lease."

Southwest opposed the Wright Amendment for years, but has assumed a neutral position on the issue the past couple of years.

Southwest officials said the recent property acquisition from Triton was unrelated to the Wright Amendment.

Those officials said the complex would be used to relocate operations that are overcrowded or inconveniently located elsewhere. Among the operations mentioned was storage of the airline's familiar peanuts-and-drinks provisions.

"At this time, that's all we're going to do with it," said spokeswoman Jones. "But I am sure as years go by, we'll find other uses."

Triton, which had controlled the property since 1987, used part of the complex for aviation-related business and subleased part of it.

Southwest vowed not to displace any of the sublease tenants.

Officials at Triton headquarters did not return phone calls about the deal.

J.D. Phillips, who heads one of Triton's aviation companies at Love Field, confirmed that the property in question had drawn interest from other potential buyers, although he would not say whom.

Phillips said he, too, suspects that Southwest's interest was related to the Wright Amendment.

"Everybody looks at everything with the Wright Amendment in mind," he said.

Bartos said he believes that Southwest has made other strategic real estate acquisitions in recent months around Love Field.

He added: "They're going to own Love Field before it's over."