

Pembroke Airport Commission seeks county support

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If Renfrew County wants to be more competitive and open for business, the Pembroke and Area Airport needs to be front and centre.

This the message from Laurentian Valley Councillor Allan Wren, chairman of the Pembroke and Area Airport Commission, during a presentation to Renfrew County council Wednesday. He feels the benefits of the airport can be summed up in two key words – time and convenience. He noted the airport also offers easy access to airspace with more flexibility when it comes to arrivals and departures, as well as access to fuel, maintenance, a heated hanger, ground power, de-icing, and staff that is available 24 hours a day 365 days a year.

“When it comes to making a region more economically prosperous, time and convenience are critical factors,” he said.

The request coming out of the presentation is for the airport to become part of the county of Renfrew’s economic development department as a member of OVED – Ottawa Valley Economic Development. He went on further to say the airport wants to be included in the information package given out to those making business inquiries for the county.

He outlined a number of challenges faced by the airport over the years, including the 100 per cent funding cut by Transport Canada in 1995, the departure of private carrier Pem Air in 2001, the impact of 9-11 on air travel, the impact of SARS in 2003 and the recession.

“And what did we do?” he asked. “We survived, we re-invested, we improved every single time.”

He said in most cases, parties interested in developing on a large scale in the region often contact the airport to obtain information on what it can provide.

“It is not uncommon for the airport to be aware of development pursuits before the county and municipalities,” Mr. Wren told members of county council. “That is how relevant the airport is to doing business here. We feel we can help the county of Renfrew grow business in this community.”

He believes the commission is building for a bright future and is looking to make the biggest expansion opportunity at the airport in a decade and possibly in the airport’s history. The commission is pursuing a feasibility study to determine how scheduled passenger service can be supported in a sustainable manner at the airport. This is a benefit to the entire county and every resident in it, he said.

There are charter operations that have learned about the passenger service survey and want to bid on providing service and there is an opportunity to partner with a flying school to train Canadian pilots and further develop the aviation in industry of the country.

“The airport is a \$10 million (investment), perhaps the hardest working \$10 million that has ever been invested in Renfrew County,” Mr. Wren said. “I say that because nothing even comes close to its impact. The airport is a world connection. It is the only major connection to the world that we have here. Every major business that is or ever will exist in Renfrew County needs this airport. The airport needs this council to be its most enthusiastic supporter.”

Maintaining the airport has not been without some challenges, however. One major concern of Mr. Wren and the commission is the lack of border services or customs at the Pembroke and Area Airport, which means flights from the United States must first land in either Ottawa or Toronto to receive customs clearance which adds both time and money to the trip, which could be a deterrent. He encouraged county council to lobby the federal government to reinstate customs at the airport.

Another issue is the need for infrastructure upgrades, such as repaving the runway, taxiway and aprons and building a new hanger with office space.

An interesting fact is that 1,219 metres of the runway is original from 1968 and 304 metres is new from 1984.

The airport is one of 60 certified airports in Ontario and one of 31 that is not funded by the provincial or federal governments. He explained that certification means being able to handle scheduled service and maintain the highest safety standards set by Transport Canada. Mr. Wren noted the airport commission decided to remain certified in order to maintain an ability to grow and he added it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to regain a certification following a decertification. It would not be able to have discussions about scheduled passenger service as a registered airport if it had not remained certified and in addition many government services and larger aviation customers would not use the airport.

The Pembroke and Area Airport has been in existence since 1954 when it opened as Brown's Airfield. In 1968 it was purchased by 11 municipalities and since 2000 it has been owned by six amalgamated municipalities – Laurentian Valley, Pembroke, Petawawa, Whitewater Region, Deep River and Laurentian Hills – which are represented on the Pembroke and Area Airport Commission.

The airport currently has 300 to 400 aircraft movements each month, even without scheduled passenger service. Mr. Wren noted the airport has a group of 40 pilots who use the airport for business and personal aviation, which is important because there are about 4,000 movements not linked to passenger service, including Medevac health service flights, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Canadian Forces.

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