

Airport is the key

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The Pembroke and Area Airport is the unsung engine which runs Renfrew County's economy, and the commission overseeing it wants more people to know about it.

Allan Wren, chairman of the Pembroke and Area Airport Commission, said they need to build greater awareness of their operation, one of only 60 certified municipal airports operating in Ontario, and 31 doing it without government funding. He said even without a regular passenger service, which in reality only formed a small portion of its business when it was running, the airport is an extremely busy place.

"The airport currently manages 300 to 400 aircraft movements each month," he said, ranging from private pilots, to medical flights, natural resources and policing flights and hosting private commercial aircraft for local employers.

"A town without an airport is going nowhere," he said, and provides a vital link between the region and the world beyond. In that function alone, the \$10 million facility is a valuable part of the Upper Ottawa Valley's economic machine.

"The airport makes businesses happen more efficiently," and in many cases, its existence ensures business happens at all. Mr. Wren said with time and convenience being important factors in conducting business, the airport proves its worth every day.

He said there's no comparison between a two-and-a-half hour drive to Ottawa and a less than half hour flight, or a four and a half hour trip to Toronto by road versus one only 45 minutes by air.

Mr. Wren said they are in a unique position to impact just about every community in the region, simply by being able to physically bring in business to the area.

"We know we can help the county build business," he said, but they need to get better known in the area and beyond as a great asset for investors to examine as a factor to set up shop here.

"We need to bring that awareness forward," Mr. Wren said, and explained the airport commission will be asking for a seat at the table at Ottawa Valley Economic Development, and to be included in any promotions and other such economic development activities.

"We want to be part of the package" which is used to attract investment to the county, he said. "We want them to know we have a certified airport here," which is a key asset for any business thinking of locating here.

Mr. Wren was the keynote speaker at the Upper Ottawa Valley Chamber of Commerce's annual general meeting, held Wednesday evening, and hosted by the Westwinds Restaurant at the Best Western Pembroke Inn and Conference Centre.

Besides updating everyone on the latest activities and developments at the airport, Mr. Wren also took the opportunity to debut a new video promoting the airport, its services and its worth before the chamber membership.

Mr. Wren said since they hosted thousands of people who visited Expo 150 in June, a showcase of the past, present and future of the county, much has happened at the airport.

The airport commission has invited a flying school to locate in the region, has been given the opportunity to bid on hosting an International Flight Training Centre, and has wrapped up a commercial survey on providing scheduled passenger service from Pembroke, as they continue to build their business case for resuming it.

Mr. Wren said the military remains its biggest overall customer, and noted in 2010, they recorded 60 medivac flights, each one freeing up an ambulance which would have had to have taken the trip by road if the service hadn't been provided. He added he suspects the number of medical flights using the airport is a lot higher than that, as these activities are only recorded during regular business hours.

"Today, we're building a very bright future," he said, as they work towards their biggest expansion in a decade.

Also included on their to-do list is to upgrade and resurface the runway to permit it to handle heavier aircraft, construct an additional hanger and office space and lobby the government to reestablish the customs office at the airport terminal, a service cut in 2000.

Mr. Wren said the airport remains a link to the world and is an important tool to promote business and investment in Renfrew County. He said he hopes the commission can count on the chamber's support to help promote its presence.

"Remember, a mile of roadway gives you a mile of road, but a mile of runway gives you the world."

Stephen Uhler is a Daily Observer multimedia journalist

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