

Flight plan to recognizing airports as municipal assets

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Provincial and territorial forest firefighting crews use small and regional airports as operational staging and refueling points. Photo: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources plane in Saulte Ste. Marie, Ont., courtesy of the Airport Management Council of Ontario

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Anyone involved in municipal services acknowledges that significant effort and capital is expended every day in the maintenance of systems that Canadians rely on to support a highly sought-after standard of living.

The nexus of roads, landfills, sewers, water treatment facilities, and other forms of utilities often spring to mind when one considers the city services that operate around the clock to serve local citizens. However, small and regional

airports are yet another point of critical infrastructure that some municipalities have ownership, and their value should be lauded.

Canadians often associate airports with federal jurisdiction and passenger service that connects them to faraway destinations, but airport infrastructure is an issue that hits home for northern, rural, and smaller-sized municipalities as well.

Regional and municipal models of ownership mean that aerodromes and airports are often a topic of discussion at local councils. In challenging deliberations over balancing budgets, potential increases in tax rates, and elected officials making decisions in the best interests of their constituents, budgeting for community-owned airports – and potentially their divestiture – highlight the topic of public ownership of airports to local citizens.

It is important to note that municipally owned airports are important to the communities and surrounding areas that they serve, even though much debate about their sustainability is rooted in financial affairs.

Elements of Public Safety

Airport activities are diverse and often related to their location, geography, and proximity to population centres, but it is clear that local and regional airports are points of critical infrastructure.

These airports play a role in public safety and emergency preparedness, meaning they are integral to logistically assisting relevant provincial ministries. Some elements of this category operate below the radar and sometimes are overlooked.

By far, the sharpest of examples of airports as crucial elements in public safety and life-saving activities occurs during times of natural disasters, such as wildfire and flooding seasons in Canada, as well as when medical evacuations (medevacs) are necessary.

Provincial and territorial forest firefighting crews use small and regional airports as operational staging and refueling points in hopes of containing the fires before they affect northern and rural populations.

In a related matter, community airports assist in the aerial evacuations of affected populations in times of wildland fires. In some parts of the country, a similar level of planning, aerial monitoring, and action applies to spring flooding season. Reliable air infrastructure ensures that available assistance can tactically and quickly enter affected areas.

The proximity of local and small airports able to accept medevacs highlights the importance of readily available air infrastructure as well. Some may contend that because new hospitals are constructed with helipads, the use of small airports in patient transportation no longer commands the level of attention that it once did; however, that is not particularly the case.

There are times when helicopters are unable to land due to unfavourable weather conditions. And sometimes patients need to be transported to facilities further distances away. Fixed-wing aircraft are the called-upon method. Critically ill patients are assisted more expediently when air infrastructure is near the connections to the specialized care that they need.

Small and regional airports assist in timely matters that often fly under the radar until one ponders the agencies that make use of them. When time is of the essence, search and rescue crews can get up in the air and gain an aerial view when airports are adjacent to the locations in question. There are instances where provincial and federal police agencies need to use local airport infrastructure to engage in security operations as well.

Resource and Services Management

Few would associate community airports with the provision of natural resource management and/or environmental programming, yet some are bases for ministries responsible for such responsibilities.

In the summer months, strategically located airports are used for the aerial distribution of oral rabies vaccine. This is the most efficient manner in

dispersing the medicines over large distances for best results. It may not seem like a critical operation; however, as communities grow and critters roam cities, prospects of human-animal interactions increase as well.

Yet another important role that local and small airports engage in is the assistance of hydroelectric companies in maintenance of power lines. These airports are in close proximity to where the work needs to be completed and thus permit the efficient completion of upkeep and potential improvements.

Reliable energy infrastructure that is promptly and regularly supported is a basic necessity for communities across Canada. One would not expect airports to play a role to some extent in this element, but they do, and the closer they are to work that needs to be completed, the better.

Canadians are aware that many municipalities are growing at an accelerated pace and more services will be expected of communities of the future. It is often noted that airports are key drivers of economic development, as air infrastructure potentially attracts interest from diverse businesses and thus corporate investment.

As municipalities across Canada look to attract investment to their areas, the proximity to a well-connected transportation system – including accessibility to an airport – is often a deciding factor when corporations decide to set up their next endeavour in one community over another.

Small and regional airports are often home to diverse commercial operations that provide general aviation services as well. Flight schools often find reliable bases for pilots in training to complete their circuits and ultimately become licensed, privately or commercially.

As Canada continues to experience a commercial pilot shortage, the importance of existing airports that facilitate flight schools cannot be overlooked. Aircraft maintenance companies frequently find homes at small and regional airports, which in turn leads to employees with specialized skills often residing in nearby communities. The airport and aviation industries provide employment opportunities for those willing to grow their careers and gain unique skill sets.

Capital Support Programs

Provinces across Canada recognize the significance of local airports that assist communities in the provision of public safety and economic development activities. It is for this reason that some launched capital support programs for publicly available airports that fall under infrastructure spending and planning.

In B.C., the British Columbia Air Access Program is a cost-share program that assists airports, water aerodromes, and heliports with funding to fulfill their infrastructure and environmental needs. In Alberta, the essential tasks of rehabilitation and improvement of community-owned public use airports is supported through the Community Airport Program (CAP) as part of the wider Strategic Transportation Infrastructure Program. Further, CAP provides 50/50 cost-sharing grants for rehabilitation, construction, and improvement of community-owned infrastructure projects in Saskatchewan.

These provinces acknowledge the importance of local airports, as well as the costs of ensuring they remain operational, because decision makers accept the viewpoint that airports are critical infrastructure for their local communities.

Not all provinces offer capital programs to support municipally owned airports in rehabilitation, safety, and construction projects – a standout being Ontario – but it is politically astute to follow such programming soon. Municipalities that recognize the value of their airports and hope to retain them as municipal assets while also facing proposing effective budgets to their constituents certainly need some level of support.

Community Airports: Assets to Local Population

One would not question the fact that airports are critical infrastructure when one considers all the daily activities that occur at those with the highest traffic across Canada. Nonetheless, it is worth examining small and regional airports under the same lens when one considers all the vital public services that they support routinely.

Regional and municipal models of ownership ultimately lead to the conclusion that these airports should be considered municipal infrastructure as well. Small and local airports merit similar value as the roads, bridges, sewers, and other foundations enabling public services that require costly investments. Provision of expedient medical evacuation, forest fire firefighting, and search and rescue operations coupled with economic development prospects of the future underscore this point.

Municipalities that own community airports should consider them to be assets to their local populations. It is understood that it is costly to maintain airport infrastructure, especially when annual budgets and responsible spending of taxpayer money are under consideration. But they provide vital services to surrounding communities, particularly in rural and northern contexts.

The potential loss of airport infrastructure in these areas cannot be easily reversed. Their value should be lauded now with a keen eye observing how they can assist the development of Canadian municipalities of the future.

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