

Airport to press its advantages

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It's been 75 years since construction at Red Deer Airport began, yet the aviation facility at Springbrook remains a work in progress.

RJ Steenstra, CEO of the Red Deer Regional Airport Authority, focuses as much on potential as he does on past achievements when talking about the airport. This includes the prospects of more frequent scheduled passenger flights and more destinations, the growth of aviation-related industry at the airport and future development of the 900 acres of land there.

"Ideally, this could become an economic hub for the region, and a place where business — aviation or otherwise — would want to locate to because of the convenience of transportation," said Steenstra.

"It certainly looks very bright for the future of Red Deer Airport, and the ability to serve this community and the businesses that are located here in a more meaningful way."

Bruce Thorne shares Steenstra's enthusiasm. A retired navigation systems engineer with Transport Canada, he's seen his share of airports — and says Red Deer's compares favourably with the best of them.

"In my opinion, it's the most ideal for aviation safety — for the visibility in the air and runways and the uncluttered airspace, and the security and the environment," said Thorne, who's lived in Red Deer since 1999 and spent about 10 years on the Red Deer Regional Airport Authority board.

"I never saw an airport with so many advantages."

The recent announcement that Sky Wings Aviation Academy Ltd. has been contracted to train 200 Chinese pilots at Red Deer Airport is confirmation of its appeal, added Thorne.

The airport generated nearly 51,000 aircraft movements in 2012 — second only to North Bay, Ont. — among 51 flight service centre airports across Canada. North Bay's total was 51,153.

"We just missed it by literally one good flying



Photo by JEFF STOKOE/Advocate staff

RJ Steenstra, CEO of the Red Deer Regional Airport Authority, stands in front of the Harvard aircraft that's mounted by the terminal building at the Red Deer Airport. Shortly after the RCAF decommissioned the Penhold Base's training fleet in 1965, this plane was recommissioned for a single flight over the Red Deer Exhibition parade route. The city subsequently bought the plane and donated it to the base.

day," said Steenstra.

Thorne said he's been surprised how little area residents know about their airport.

That could explain past failed attempts to estab-

lish and maintain scheduled passenger service at the airport, with no such service available between September 2011 and April 2012. Since then, however, Northwestern Air Lease Ltd. has been carrying passengers, and now flies five days a week between Red Deer and Kelowna and three days a week between Red Deer and Fort McMurray, with connections beyond both.

That helped boost Red Deer Airport's 2012 passenger count to 1,468, a 220-per-cent improvement over 2011. Four months into this year, the tally had already reached 1,583.

Steenstra said Northwestern is looking at additional routes, and efforts to attract other passenger airlines continue.

"We're always putting business cases out in front of other airlines, not just national carriers but also other regional carriers."

This is a point of contention for Gary Hillman, who operates Hillman Air and is a former member of the Red Deer Regional Airport Authority board. He would rather see resources directed toward encouraging aviation-related businesses at the airport, explaining that these typically have a more lasting impact than passenger carriers.

"It's not just something you can pick up and go, like an airline does," he said, adding that financial concessions are also often needed to attract airlines.

Hillman believes more businesses would consider locating or expanding at Red Deer Airport if better opportunities existed.

"Those companies would look here if we were a little better poised to show them that we have a development ready for them."

Red Deer County is close to implementing an area structure plan for the airport lands, which would set the stage for more aggressive development there, said Steenstra.

He acknowledged the importance of businesses operating at the airport, noting that these account for more than 200 jobs, wages in the range of \$12 million to \$15 million, and about \$40 million in regional economic activity.

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