

Red Deer Advocate

Airport flights take off

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Red Deer Airport is gaining ground with increased aircraft movements and the heralding in of new scheduled service starting this Friday.

The number of airplanes landing and taking off at the regional airport is showing a 36 per cent rise from January through March compared with the same time frame in 2011. It's expected aircraft movements will run an estimated 47,000 in 2012, compared with 44,138 in 2011.

Northwestern Air Lease Ltd. will begin its scheduled direct non-stop service between Red Deer and Kelowna on Friday.

RJ Steenstra, chief executive officer for Red Deer Airport, gave these highlights as part of the first quarterly update to Red Deer city council on Monday.

"Obviously, we're thrilled that Northwestern Air is coming on Friday and will make their first flight to Kelowna," said Steenstra.

Both the aircraft crew and plane will be based here, said Steenstra.

As well, Northwestern Air begins direct non-stop service between Red Deer, Edmonton and Dawson Creek on May 14.

Charter air service is also seeing growth, Steenstra added.

If aircraft movements continue to grow, then NAV Canada, the private, non-share capital corporation that owns and operates Canada's civil air navigation service, will look at building an air traffic control tower.

"We're a ways off of that, but it's an important marker for us in terms of aircraft movements," said Steenstra.

Right now, there's a flight service centre in the air terminal. Staff in the centre advise air traffic coming in.

Steenstra said over the last year, the airport has rebranded itself and really looked at how it fits within the marketplace.

The airport did a website redesign as well, giving more information on what services it provides.

It also began doing de-icing for planes on the tarmac last November, which has been so beneficial for passengers.

Steenstra said this year, the airport wants to continue to build its business and support Northwestern Air's business.

It also is looking at applying for customs designation through CANPASS, which is a series of Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) programs expediting the border clearance process for frequent, low-risk, pre-approved travellers into Canada.

Steenstra said having the ability for passengers to clear customs would be convenient for those heading to or coming back from the United States.

CANPASS has some criteria though, including distance requirements between Calgary and Edmonton.

“That’s the challenge,” said Steenstra. “We physically are just outside (Calgary and Edmonton travel distance) so it’s convincing them that there’s an opportunity and a market here that should be served. It makes sense because we’re the largest airport in Central Alberta.”

The airport is holding its annual general meeting on Thursday at 5 p.m. at the Holiday Inn in Gasoline Alley. The public is welcome.

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