

Red Deer Advocate

Airport looks to grow, quickly



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Among the items on Red Deer Airport CEO RJ Steenstra's wish list is a runway extension, a bigger terminal building and more parking.

But he doesn't have much time to dream.

The pending entry of new discount carriers into the Canadian market, and the expansion of existing airlines, means the Red Deer Airport Authority has to act quickly.

"Even if an airline said, 'Great, we want to fly 737s into Red Deer,' they can't because I don't have the runway length," said Steenstra.

"If we grow our runway to 7,000 feet — which would be an expansion of 1,500 feet from its current length — we will be able to meet the needs of narrow-body jets with two or three seats on each side."

Similarly, the terminal building at the Springbrook-based airport is unlikely to impress national carriers.

"We have a terminal that's almost at capacity now, if not at capacity," said Steenstra.

That means there's no room for expansion of services like car rentals.

“I don’t even have a closet that I could lease right now. We’re full.”

The situation isn’t much better outside, where the once ample parking lot is being consumed by increasing numbers of vehicles.

These and other capital needs are on the table as the airport works on a new master plan to replace the 13-year-old document it currently has.

The process became urgent last year, when the passenger count at the airport spiked by more than 700 per cent, to nearly 12,000 — thanks in large part to Air Canada introducing local daily service, beginning Sept. 3.

Airport officials have made a “conservative” estimate that the figure will swell by a further 280 per cent in 2014.

That’s just the tip of the iceberg, insists Steenstra. Countless Central Alberta travellers continue to bypass the Red Deer Airport in favour of Calgary’s and Edmonton’s international airports.

“The market itself is proven already, because we’ve got a tremendous amount of outflow from Central Alberta to neighboring airports.

“It’s just now, can we put the infrastructure in place that can capture that, and can we have the infrastructure in place — or at least partially in place — so that I can go out and garner support for more service and larger aircraft and single-aisle jet service?”

The new master plan will also focus on the development of airport land, opening the door for new aviation businesses and growth of existing ones.

“Our cost structure as an airport is a fraction of what larger airports have in terms of their cost structure,” said Steenstra of the competitive advantage that the Red Deer Airport has.

He added that the facility’s centralized location is another plus for many businesses.

The new plan will also address program initiatives at the airport, such as other new services.

Steenstra hopes to have recommendations ready for the airport’s stakeholders — most notably Red Deer County, the City of Red Deer and the Red Deer Chamber of Commerce — this spring, and the plan completed by the end of summer. Others being consulted include airport tenants, the airlines that operate there, economic development organizations and the Springbrook Community Association. A public consultation session is also planned for late May.

“We need to include everyone who impacts or is impacted by the airport,” said Steenstra.

An aggressive plan carries risk, he acknowledged, particularly in the sometimes unpredictable aviation industry. But Steenstra points to the example of the Nanaimo Airport, which undertook a costly expansion and upgrade despite its proximity to large airports at Victoria and Comox.

“They’re benefiting now from making that investment because they’ve got all sorts of customers, including WestJet Encore, now going into Nanaimo.”

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