

Airport passenger count up 717%



Flight AC 7206 prepares to depart from the Red Deer Airport on Sept. 3, following a ceremony marking the commencement of Air Canada service at the airport. The resulting 42 flights a week to and from the Red Deer Airport helped it reach a scheduled passenger count of nearly 12,000 in 2013.

By [Harley Richards - Red Deer Advocate](#)

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If you've been cursing the length of your driveway during the recent snowy months, be thankful you're not RJ Steenstra. The CEO of the Red Deer Airport has 5,500-foot and 3,300-foot runways to keep clear, as well as taxiways, a terminal apron and a parking lot.

"An extraordinary effort has to be put in to make sure that these runways are open," said Steenstra, who credits his staff for the long hours they've put in battling the snow. "We've got some mountains of snow that we've got to get rid of."

Despite his ongoing challenges with frozen precipitation, Steenstra has reason to celebrate. The Red Deer Airport's tally of scheduled passengers — excluding those on charter flights — reached 11,997 in 2013. That's a whopping 717 per cent increase over the 1,468 passengers who flew in and out of the Springbrook-based aviation facility in 2012. In 2011, the figure was just 432.

Air Canada's introduction in September of three return flights daily at the airport provided a big lift to the passenger count, said Steenstra, as did Northwestern Air's expansion of its local service.

Inbound and outbound flights increased to 62 from eight during the year, and in December alone nearly 2,500 passengers flew in and out of the airport.

In fact, said Steenstra, Northwestern Air even brought in an extra plane to help keep pace with demand for flights between Red Deer and Kelowna during the Christmas season.

"You can already see the behaviour is changing," he said of the growing desire of Central Albertans to use the local airport.

With a full year of its expanded offering of flights, Steenstra expects the airport's 2014 total to grow even higher.

"I'm already projecting between 35,000 and 45,000 passengers."

The increased air traffic helped contribute to a 34 per cent increase in airport revenues, said Steenstra. And it's improved the likelihood that the airport will soon qualify for federal Airports Capital Assistance Program funding, which requires at least three years of scheduled passenger counts of 1,000 or more.

The airport's expanded passenger service has also resulted in approximately 20 new jobs, he noted.

The Red Deer Regional Airport Authority is now taking steps to build upon this success and capitalize on new opportunities. It's preparing a master plan that will map out future development, such as runway expansion that will open the airport up to bigger planes.

"Generally, any single-aisle jet aircraft could land on 7,000 feet," said Steenstra.

Also to be addressed is the development of Red Deer Airport's nearly 900 acres, with facility expansion and the creation of new commercial property on the table.

"We're seeing tremendous interest on the land side," said Steenstra, who regularly receives inquiries from aviation-related companies, and existing airport tenants that want to expand.

He's optimistic scheduled passenger service at Red Deer Airport will continue to grow and become more diverse. Among the new destinations Steenstra would like to see are Vancouver, Saskatoon and Winnipeg, as well as Grande Prairie and other northern communities.

The airport is already becoming a hub for Northwestern.

"Northwestern has structured their schedule to have Kelowna and Fort McMurray flights meet and passengers transfer from one to the other.

"We've heard they're bringing in a third (airplane), and potentially two more this year."

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