

Red Deer Advocate

Big plans for airport

By [Myles Fish - Red Deer Advocate](#)

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Within five years, Toronto or Vancouver could be a single plane ride away from Red Deer.

One year ago there was virtually no passenger traffic at the Red Deer Airport. This year, officials are projecting over 40,000 passengers will get on planes at the Springbrook-based operation.

And in 20 years, the airport authority's master plan sees 247,000 passengers going through the airport doors.

"The challenge that we as a community have is if you don't build your airport, they'll never come," said airport CEO RJ Steenstra.

Building the airport is exactly the vision set out in the Red Deer Airport Authority's master plan, on display to the public at an information session on Tuesday evening.

The 20-year plan details the work that would need to be done at the facility to draw more airlines and aircraft to Red Deer to serve the growing market.

The biggest need: lengthening the main runway by approximately 600 metres and widening it to allow '737' aircraft enough space to take off and land. The master plan's mid-range forecast envisions 11 weekly departures for the 136-seat vessels by 2033.

"I can't present a business case to an airline that flies a 737 today, because they can't access. But is there interest? No question," said Steenstra.

He said the majority of the local passenger volume is on its way to Toronto, Vancouver, Houston and Phoenix. To fly direct to those locations would require at least 737 aircraft.

Thrice-daily service to Calgary on small turboprop planes has been offered through the airport for the last nine months to significant interest. There are also regular flights to Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie and Kelowna.

But to go with any increase in service, so a larger terminal is needed. The current terminal is already insufficient during peak traffic times — and no washroom is available to passengers while in the holding area.

The master plan envisions a small terminal expansion in 2015 and a further tripling of the expanded space in 2018. The latter expansion would provide adequate space for the peak expected passenger flow during 737 departures and arrivals.

Some Penhold-area residents at the public meeting expressed their concerns over the increased noise that has come along with the increased air traffic out of Springbrook.

One man who lives under the flight path south of the airport said eight years ago it was neat to see the occasional plane fly overhead, but now it can be bothersome. And if there will be a further significant increase in traffic, he posited that property values under the flight paths would plummet.

“There has to be a plan for those few people who are actually really affected by this,” said the man, who did not want his name used.

Current and projected noise footprints were presented at the meeting, with consultant Eddy Bordignon saying that the current aircraft that fly out of the airport make more noise than 737s. Plus, he said, jet engines are consistently getting quieter and quieter as technology improves.

Despite the projected passenger increase, the outlook does not portend a great increase in the number of planes taking off from the airport.

But with the greater foot traffic would come more vehicles, and Steenstra said the airport authority would then need to work with the county and Alberta Transportation to improve access.

Over 93 per cent of current local fliers “leak,” according to the plan, meaning they travel to Edmonton or Calgary to fly instead of starting their air journey in Red Deer. Decreasing that number means being able to offer more attractive flights and also improving the terminal environment, said Steenstra.

He said airports generate tremendous economic impact — the master plan puts this year’s figure at \$99 million — and providing air services to locals is a matter of the public good.

“We’ve got to start to now put the pieces in place that will see us continue to develop and grow and serve the needs of this community,” said Steenstra.

The airport authority has already collected input on the plan from area stakeholders, and that and the public feedback will contribute to the final draft of the plan that will go to the authority’s board in August.

Once approved, the plan will then be presented to Red Deer city and county councils in September. Capital cost estimates will be included then.

The master plan can be accessed at <http://www.flyreddeer.com/airport-authority/red-deer-airport-master-plan.html> .

Public comment is welcome until June 17. To submit input, email Ian at waymanni@mmm.ca or contact the airport at 403-886-4388.

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