

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT | AIR SERVICE

# Lack of air service keeps towns from taking off

**Attract businesses** | Good air passenger service can attract companies to an area

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FREELANCE WRITER

YORKTON, Sask. — Modern communications technology has made it possible for Don Rae to live in Yorkton, even though the chief financial officer of the oil company he works for is based in Calgary.

However, the weak link in this arrangement is air travel.

Rae must travel to Calgary and other major cities several times a month but using a scheduled passenger airline out of Regina is time consuming.

"For us, time is money," he said. "We have to allow an extra day all the time."

Rae said improved scheduled air service in his home town would be a significant benefit to existing businesses in the city and an important way to attract new companies to the region.

"I believe with all my heart if we can establish a good airport here it will be important moving forward."

It was a common theme heard during a recent aviation conference in Yorkton.

Yorkton Airport Authority chair Ron Evinou said improving rural air service will require more investment.

Many airports were built decades ago and little beyond basic maintenance has been done since.

"Now we've got to catch up with 40, 50 years of neglect."

Dennis Baranieski, a vice-president with Pronto Airways, said a study commissioned by the Saskatchewan Aviation Council concluded that \$300 million a year would be needed to maintain the province's 148 airports.

However, he said the study's authors recognized it wasn't feasible to expect that kind of funding and instead recommended \$100 million over 10 years.

"I think we could do some real good work with that funding."

The provincial government invests \$500,000 a year in southern airports through its Community Airport Program, he added.

Baranieski said communities need to take a different approach to airports.

"What we're talking about is a mile of highway (the landing strip) in your city we call an airport," he said.

"It's a mile of highway in your city you want some support for."

He said the federal government funds only airports with regularly scheduled passenger service, which essentially excludes all rural airports.

Rae said the passenger service requirements need to be reconsidered, noting charter service, parcel movements and agriculture air service are all important to Saskatchewan communities.

"They can't be one shoe fits all airports," he said.

Baranieski said the limited funds likely need to be targeted to where they are most needed, similar to what happened with hospitals when smaller facilities were closed.



Investment required for air services may be prohibitive for small communities but may be viable for a region. | FILE PHOTO

"The reality is I don't think every community represented by folks here will have an airport," he said.

People have to start thinking about how a region rather than a single community can support an airport, he added.

Chris Oleson with Saskatchewan Executive Air said airports need to stay up to date to be viable, by such things as installing global positioning systems technology to facilitate landings.

He said the equipment costs \$30,000 to \$35,000 per strip and annual maintenance costs \$3,000, but it would modernize airports for GPS landings, which are increasingly the standard.

Evinou said communities should not shy away from lobbying provincial governments for the level of funding they require.

"I think it's a time to be kind of bold and audacious," he said.

"I think we should be demanding it. I think we should expect it. You should start to demand of your government to get the funding."

Evinou said the investment in airports makes business sense.

"Businesspeople are here now and they know their time is valuable."

John Parker knows first hand the challenges of attracting scheduled passenger service to a small airport.

He said Swift Current, Sask., lost scheduled service 15 years ago.

When the city began to investigate attracting air service again, it learned how important it is to maintain existing federally recognized certification.

"It's very, very important to keep your certification," Parker said.

Once it's gone, it is costly and time consuming to reestablish, he added.

If an air service is established, Parker said, it is up to the community to ensure it is viable, especially businesspeople.

"This is not... for Mom and Dad and

the kids to fly," he said. "The business community have to be there... You've got to use it or you lose it."

He also said marketing the air service is vital.

"In this industry, like any other business, to be successful, you've got to market. It needs somebody on the ground running all the time marketing."

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