

Airport Revitalization

Community Airport Partnership Program

Written by **Michelle McConwell**

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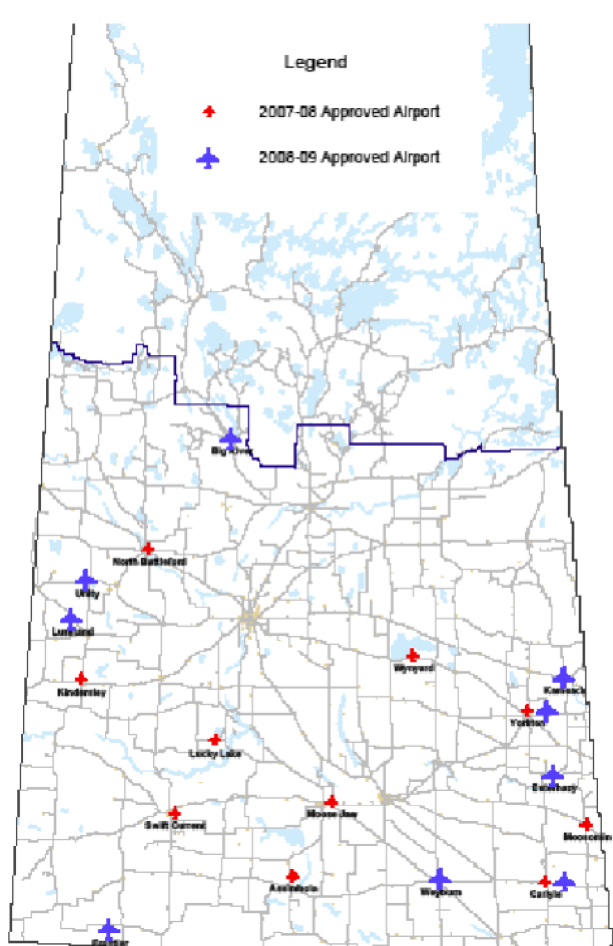
Yorkton Regional Airport (Photo by Ron Garnett/AirScapes)

The prairie province has a network of about 15-25 regional airports eligible for CAP funding, located in the southern half of the province. Smaller airports requiring infrastructure renewal are also eligible under the program. Recent rural revitalization and activity in the oil and gas sector are just two reasons why reliable aviation facilities are essential to the region. Airports located in the northern region are ineligible as 17 northern airports are owned and operated by SMHI, and private northern airports are mainly owned and maintained by mining companies. A study jointly funded by Western Economic Diversification Canada, SMHI and Saskatchewan Aviation Council (SAC) is currently being conducted to develop a provincial airport strategy that will encompass airports in both the northern and southern regions.

Community Airport Partnership (CAP)

Approved Airports

2007-08 & 2008-09



taxiway, lighting and navigational aid system upgrades. Finally, a four-member committee made up of representatives from SMHI, the SAC and operational specialists from the Regina Airport Authority and Saskatoon Airport Authority review the applications against the selection criteria and recommend projects for ministerial approval.

Allocating the half-million-dollar provincial contribution is no easy task. A per project maximum of \$200,000 was established to ensure that both large- and small-scale projects are approved. The project limit enables airports to plan expensive or large improvements over a number of years. Furthermore, matching the provincial funding with lesser amounts is easier for small communities to disburse over a number of years rather than all at once.

In its first year, the program was oversubscribed by nearly \$1.3 million. Of the applications, 12 projects were approved in 2007, including funding for runway extension, asphalt and lighting upgrades, crack repair and drainage rehabilitation. Moose Jaw Municipal Airport was one of the airports to receive funding in the program's first year. The airport sought to improve the existing 36-year-old runway. Brian Martynook of the Moose Jaw Chamber of Commerce commends the runway rehabilitation project, saying that overall safety has improved and more private planes, including crop dusters and small air cargo planes, are utilising the enhanced infrastructure.

By comparison, 2008 saw project applications totalling nearly \$1.1 million, further reinforcing the need for such a program. For one successful airport, the annual grant might not be enough. Carlyle Regional Airport was approved for 2007 and 2008 CAP funding, but the airport is in such disrepair that an estimated \$1.2 million worth of work is required. The town has chosen to carry out the repairs in phases and is balancing competing projects to match funding for the 2008 grant.

Of the nine airports approved for 2008 funding, most are planning for an autumn construction season. Esterhazy Airport, in particular, hosts activities at the airport during the summer months that require use of the runway. Following an annual drag racing event the airport will commence work on an asphalt overlay for the runway, taxiway and apron.

Overwhelmed by the regional and community support, the CAP selection committee said the selection decision is very difficult. Most applications are accompanied by numerous letters of support indicating the many benefits an upgrade to the airport would provide. "Communities realize that they cannot take their small airports for granted. The cooperation, thought and enthusiasm that go into each application is truly impressive," says the SAC's Keim.

The program is giving regional airports an opportunity to look forward to their future. The City of Moose Jaw is exploring costs related to taxiway and apron improvements, as well as lengthening the runway to 5,000 feet for use by small jets. Esterhazy, with a strong business and mining community, is able to provide reliable infrastructure for local, regional and international companies while ensuring the safety of the community with continued air ambulance service.

In Western Canada, similar government programs are operating successfully in Alberta and British Columbia. Alberta's Community Airport Program (CAP) has been providing financial assistance to public-use, community-owned airports since 1999; and the Transportation Partnerships Program has been operating in B.C. since 2003. An SMHI representative notes that the primary difference in Saskatchewan's initiative is that the community and region's involvement is critical to the process. This is apparent in the communities that have developed partnerships with surrounding rural municipalities and businesses to provide funding to improve their airports.

The Saskatchewan Community Airport Partnership Program is breathing new life into the province's small airports. Combined with community spirit, small airports are being revitalized for safe use even by recreational vehicles. Every year that the program is in operation provides another community with the possibility of preserving air access and all of the benefits that offers the region.

Janet Keim, president of the SAC, acknowledges that "regional airports are vital to the economic and social well-being of the areas that they serve." Keim and the Council were instrumental in petitioning the government for some form of financial assistance to smaller airports. A majority of regional airports are operated and maintained by municipal governments which, without scheduled air service, do not have the revenue streams to finance upgrades and improvements.

To be considered for funding, applicants are asked to submit project summaries detailing not only the improvements, but the benefits to the community and the region. The CAP Program is part of the government's larger initiative to fundamentally realign the province's transportation network to meet current and future demands of Saskatchewan's thriving economy. In his 2008 CAP Announcement, Highways and Infrastructure Minister Wayne Elhard recognized community airports as not only promoting economic activity but also linking businesses to markets; supporting the agriculture industry; providing air ambulance, law enforcement and fire protection access; playing a part in resource extraction and mineral exploration; and bringing tourists to the province.

Airports like Yorkton Regional Airport have conducted studies to place a value on the benefits. For Yorkton, the airport generated \$5.7 million in gross revenue in 2004. Swift Current commissioned a similar study indicating over \$2.4 million of total value added gross domestic product expenditures. For some airports the benefit is simply realized through the continued ambulance and emergency air services.

Projects are evaluated first on improving safety; however, successful applicants must also demonstrate support and commitment from the community and region. Projects given priority include runway,

