

NEWS

Airport 'ready, willing and able' for Flair flights in May



Saint John Airport CEO Derrick Stanford is pictured here on an empty runway in January. Stanford is hopeful the arrival of Flair Airlines in May could signal the return of regular flights in Saint John.

Photo: Sean Mott/Telegraph-Journal

Sean Mott | Telegraph-Journal

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SAINT JOHN • The Saint John Airport has been quiet for the last month, but its CEO Derrick Stanford is hopeful it can roar back to life in the spring.

Flair Airlines announced Wednesday it would be making its debut in Saint John on May 1 after nearly a year of delays due to COVID-19. Stanford thinks the airline's arrival could signal to other companies like Air Canada that Saint John is safe for travel.

"We think success breeds success," he said.

The last month has seen the Saint John Airport grind to halt as the pandemic continues to take a heavy toll on air travel. Air Canada's final flight from Saint John happened on Jan. 11, leaving

the airport without any commercial flights. It's not completely new territory for the airport as all flights from April 1 to June 25 were cancelled during the early days of the pandemic.

"We're certainly a lot leaner organization since we've taken all the cost-cutting measures in 2020," Stanford said at the time.

Those measures saw the airport reduce its workforce by 50 per cent. The airport's gift shop closed its doors, while the single restaurant in the terminal has been closed since last April. Air Canada workers have been furloughed and the car rental businesses are set up for appointment-only service. One of those companies, Hertz, pulled out of the Saint John Airport completely in January, months after the business filed for bankruptcy.

Flair's announcement Wednesday comes after months of delays. The airline, which aims to offer cheaper flights than its competitors, was originally slated to take off from Saint John in June 2020, but the pandemic pushed that launch to October. When October rolled around, Flair announced it would be putting those plans on ice indefinitely.

When Flair starts on May 1, Saint John will be its only New Brunswick location, offering flights from the airport to Toronto on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Stanford said Flair looked at Saint John as an untapped market in air travel.

"They felt there was a really good opportunity to launch in the Saint John market," he said. "They're looking for those different markets that are underserved."

David Duplisea, CEO for the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce, said he's "delighted" Flair has chosen to stick with Saint John as its launching pad in New Brunswick. He also noted the airport typically brings in millions of dollars in revenue to the region through travel and tourism, meaning the return of flights could be a big help to businesses.

"We're extremely happy because it shows this light at the end of the tunnel," he said. "This is a good step."

Stanford said despite the airport's minimal activity at the moment, it's prepared to handle an influx of flights in three months. The airport recently made Menzies Aviation their ground handling partner, which includes aircraft handling, check-in counter, ground handling, baggage handling, and de-icing services.

"We're ready, willing and able," Stanford said.

Stanford is also hopeful Flair marks the return of airlines to the Saint John region, beginning the slow climb back to flight passenger numbers from before the pandemic.

"Airlines will absolutely come back," he said.