

CITY HALL

# Feds step up for Saint John Airport before it loses flight



Saint John Airport CEO Derrick Stanford said the airport will play a key role in Saint John's post-COVID recovery.

Photo: Telegraph-Journal Archive

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## Emma McPhee | Telegraph-Journal

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SAINT JOHN • The Saint John Airport will have an important role to play in the region's post-COVID-19 recovery, say airport officials, city council members and business leaders.

But first it will need support to survive the pandemic, and Saint John Airport CEO Derrick Stanford said funding announced by the federal government on Monday is a good start.

Just last week, the Saint John Airport was within hours of losing its only daily flight – a Montreal flight with Air Canada – before federal Transport Minister Marc Garneau stepped in to negotiate with the airline, Stanford said.

The city airport used to see 17 flights per day before the pandemic, but route cancellations, delays in airline service restarts and other pandemic challenges have whittled that number down to just one.

“The region has certainly been dealt some devastating blows,” Stanford said in a presentation to city council Monday night.

Despite these challenges, Stanford said the airport is poised to play a role in moving the region beyond the pandemic.

"We know our ability to facilitate travel to and from our region has a direct positive impact on business attraction, retention and growth, tourism recovery and growth, population growth, and newcomer attraction and retention," he said.

The presentation to city council pitched the importance of the airport in Saint John's post-COVID recovery. It came on the same day the federal government announced financial support for the country's beleaguered airports.

Of note for the Saint John Airport, Stanford said, was \$206 million over two years in funding for regional economic development agencies to help with route preservation. The Saint John Airport will also become eligible for the Airports Capital Assistance Program, which the federal government has pledged an additional \$186 million to, to help with capital projects.

The \$229 million in rent relief for airports who pay rent to the federal government is also something the Saint John Airport will likely be eligible for, Stanford said in an interview Tuesday.

“We'll need to understand, you know, what the eligibility requirements are and how the mechanics work in order to apply to get funding,” he said.

Besides funding the airport received for its modernization project in 2019, the Saint John Airport has never received public funding since being privatized in 1999, Stanford said.

Stanford said he is hopeful the federal government will consider a financial support package for the airline sector as well. He'd also like to see the province launch a COVID-19 testing program for arriving passengers.

Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce CEO David Duplisea said he's happy to see airports are on the federal government's radar. In July, the chamber created a task force to lobby on behalf of the airport for federal support.

“It's a compelling piece of our value attraction,” Duplisea said. “If people are looking at locating to a particular area, then if they don't even have airline service, I would think that would be a fairly large red flag.”

Without the airport, Stanford said employers will have trouble filling highly skilled positions and hotels could see a 20 per cent drop in occupancy. The airport is also key to keeping

large corporations headquartered in Saint John, he said.

Two corporations Duplisea identified as being major users of the Saint John Airport were Cooke Aquaculture Inc. and J.D. Irving, Limited.

"Saint John is home – to our head office and the greatest number of employees in our operations," said Mary Keith, vice-president communications for J.D. Irving, Limited, in a statement. "For our business and our 3000+ employees in the Greater Saint John area, air service is a vital link."

In a statement, Joel Richardson, vice-president public relations for Cooke Aquaculture, called the airport a "critical link to the world for our seafood operations.

"The aquaculture industry has tremendous potential to generate the economic benefits, jobs, investment, and regional growth that could significantly accelerate regional recovery, and do so in an environmentally and socially responsible way," Richardson said.

Saint John Mayor Don Darling also called the airport vital to the economy in an interview on Tuesday.

"Just access – we take that for granted, being able to jump on an airplane and fly."

At Monday's meeting, Saint John council passed a motion to send a letter to the federal transportation minister asking to support the Saint John Airport through operational funding and to the province to support the piloting of rapid testing for COVID-19 at airports.

According to Stanford, the New Brunswick airports have been in conversations with the province on launching a testing program within the airports. Progress was made, he said, but slowed once the second wave of the pandemic hit.

In the throne speech on Nov. 17, Premier Blaine Higgs brought up airports, promising to study possible changes and hinting at a review of the number of airports in the province, despite airports being under federal jurisdiction.

On the question of whether the Saint John, Moncton and Fredericton airports should be merged into one, Duplisa said that ship has already sailed.

“We've got decades and decades of infrastructure investments made in existing airports,” Duplisa said. “I just don't think that it's ever going to happen.

“The regional connections are just too important.”

– *With files from Adam Huras*

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