

Airports - CAMC Article May 1, 2010,

Airports—Are They Infrastructure or Not?

Background

A strange question you may say! Are they considered infrastructure and if not, why not? Read on and I may answer your question.

During my 35 years as an Aircraft Maintenance Engineer, technician and traveler, I never thought too much about the infrastructure that supported my work or travels. Airports just sort of existed, runways were kept clean and clear of snow and foreign objects, aircraft came and went. I never really gave much thought to all the many highly skilled people who made it all work. When there were emergencies I saw the fire fighters respond, watched the snow plow operators at work and viewed runways being repaired. While in the Air Force and during my early days with Transport Canada as a maintenance inspector, I thought little of the airport support needed for our hangers. I knew the facilities were all on the airport but I did not go much deeper than that in my thinking.

In 1995 when I became responsible for the safety oversight of airports in the Prairie and Northern Transport Canada Region, I had a quick and rude awakening to their critical importance to aviation and Canada in general. Safety regulation was my main concern but one could not ignore the economic impact of airports as they employ thousands of people. I went out on many trips with airport inspectors meeting with owners and managers and received an education in the varied aspects of their operations. I soon learned that our airports and all of the people who are employed with them are both a national and aviation asset.

Devolution Challenges

Over the years, most airports were devolved away from Transport Canada to local authorities and communities. The devolution of airports was a huge challenge to many people. The airports had to be turned over to new parties and kept functioning at the same time. Transport Canada had to move safety management from internal staff instructions and policies to regulations and standards. Funding had to move from public funds to private and earned revenues. For the most part, things went well and the major airports began large expansion programs. Today the airports are much more customer orientated and have gone away from the institutional look of the past. It was not that Transport could not run clean and functional airports but they could not get all the customer amenities in that you enjoy today under federal government contracting requirements. More importantly, they could not find the necessary capital to expand and reconstruct the larger airports in the public financial system.

Small and Private Airports

For the most part, the traveling public sees the larger airports and they are same airports they always knew, but are new and improved. Only aviation interests can see that smaller and private airports have had a more difficult time. Northern airports are an exception as they are seen by most politicians and the general public as a service for northerners. They see that there is a need for medium sized community airports in the north. However, in smaller towns and cities in the more populated areas of Canada it is a different story. Airports have to compete for scarce tax dollars against curling rinks, sewers system and other important community infrastructure. It is not an easy job to sell an airport budget composed of operating costs and capital improvements to a cash strapped small city or town. Private airports are normally supported by aviation enthusiasts. Even they are under duress as cities expand and the value of the land itself rises and overwhelm the income or enjoyment of the airstrip or airport.

The Future of Small Airports

The Federal government has a program to fund some capital and safety related items. The funding is based on scheduled traffic which eliminates many smaller airports. So there we have it, a major challenge for Canada's aviation system; how to keep the airport infrastructure in aviation hands and not let it fritter away into urban developments or other land use. In addition, can you ever expand it or is it destined to fade away?

A way must be found to educate the population and politicians about the need to maintain the airport infrastructure which supports operations such as local medivac, aerial firefighting, agricultural aviation and many other services.

Why Does This Matter to CAMC and Maintainers?

Can you imagine a fully functional aviation maintenance industry without airports? Now I know the major airports will remain and so will many feeders but how many smaller operations and maintenance facilities are located on the smaller community owned and managed airports? In my opinion all maintenance personnel should take some interest in these issues.

It is gratifying to see the Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council taking an active role in providing standards for airport trades. Before airports were devolved it was Transport Canada's responsibility to have internal staffing requirements which described the necessary training and skills. Once the pool of ex-Transport employees dries up through retirements or mortality, a new generation of airport employees needs to be trained and employed. CAMC can be a great catalyst in this function.

Conclusion

I see continuing success for the larger airports which for the most part also support our largest manufacturers and maintenance facilities. Medium sized airports will probably do well. I worry about the smaller airports and the private ones. It will be very interesting to see how they survive in the

competition for attention and funding. Hopefully, all aspects of the aviation industry can help educate Canadians on the necessity of the smaller, sometimes forgotten airports and private airstrips.

Let's go back to the title. Airports of all types are, in my opinion; definitely need to be defined as infrastructure. They should be as high on the priority list as the funding for roads, bridges, etc. We need to work together to ensure governmental program designers agree. Governments are under constant pressure to fund all sorts of items as they try to balance off many competing interests. As an aviation practitioner you need to add your voice to the debate to ensure that funding is allocated to support aviation infrastructure, including all manor of airports.

We need to remember the contributions of the visionaries who imagined and built the original system; a national airport system.

Roger Beebe, May 1, 2010