

GUEST OPINION

David Duplisea: YSJ has closed again. Let's make sure that doesn't last



With the suspension of Air Canada's last remaining flight into Saint John Airport, YSJ has shut down to passenger traffic indefinitely. David Duplisea makes the case for backing the regional airport's return to service.

□ Published 01/12/2021

Photo: Telegraph-Journal archives

David Duplisea | Commentary

On Monday, Saint John Airport saw its last commercial flight take off. When the next passenger plane will land at YSJ is unknown.

Airlines and airports around the world have been hit hard by the decline in global travel as a result of COVID-19. And while we've all heard the inspiring stories of businesses – including our own chamber members – that have pivoted and persevered during these challenging times, these stories have been few and far between.

It's well documented that airports wield heavy influence on the growth of cities and industries. Airports shape business location and urban development. They bring people here for both business and pleasure. Our economic recovery and our future as a city and a region rely on a thriving airport.

Yet with passenger flights out of YSJ suspended, we have never been closer to losing our airport. We must do everything we can to ensure its survival.

Our region must step up and ensure our tourism, business growth and transportation assets are safeguarded until it's safe for them to be fully operational once again.

Our airport is a vital link to ensure our continued economic success and growth. It's about our future ability to compete with other regions and ensure our businesses have the same advantage as urban centres around the world. It's about tourism recovery and growth, attracting and retaining students, and encouraging more new Canadians to move here.

With so much at stake, we must wrap our collective arms around the Saint John Airport. We cannot rely entirely on various boards and agencies to lead this charge. Instead, we must take responsibility as a community.

We know it has been self-sustaining, profitable and growing since it was privatized in 1999. Before COVID-19, the Saint John Airport contributed more than \$60 million to our area's economic output. In 2017 and 2018, we saw two consecutive years of record-breaking passenger activity. In 2019, YSJ benefited from a major investment to completely modernize its airfield, resulting in one of the most technologically advanced airfields for an airport its size in Canada.

We need to all work together to ensure it continues to serve southern New Brunswick's travel needs.

What can you do? Share what you've read, show your support for YSJ on social media and urge governments to launch testing programs for arriving passengers.

These are challenging days. Our province has seen a resurgence of COVID-19. Vaccine supply has yet to keep up with demand. And we're looking at a period of no flight activity.

But better days are on the horizon. And when they come, we must ensure we have all economic recovery tools at our disposal – including YSJ.

We know airports have a stronger connection to regional growth and people attraction than almost any other sector or industry. It's up to all of us to work with our community partners and businesses to get our city, our region and our province back up and running to full capacity as safely and as quickly as possible – an effort that depends on the Saint John Airport.

David Duplisea is the CEO of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce.