

## **Making the case for a prosperous future**

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Not that long ago, the Saint John airport was one of the fastest growing in Atlantic Canada.

Forward to today, as we recover from the pandemic days, our region is undergoing a resurgence: the economy is firing, the port is bustling, residents and tourists alike are back on the streets and in our restaurants, while concerts and events have brought some welcome life and excitement to our communities.

Our hosting of the Memorial Cup in June not only made the Sea Dogs champions in their hometown but is estimated to have brought more than \$10 million into our economy.

As a Chamber, we are concerned that economic and civic progress will be negatively impacted by cuts to our regional routes and connections.

In case you missed it, Air Canada has reduced its Saint John options from five flights a day to two, resulting in a 50 per cent reduction in the number of seats available, along with scheduling changes. In addition, SWOOP has announced that they will be suspending their spring and summer service on September 4<sup>th</sup>. Given that the SWOOP passenger counts were quite good, with 7,000 passengers utilizing the flights out of YSJ, we are hopeful they will return in the spring.

Travelers from the Saint John region must now fly to Montreal or Toronto just to get to Halifax. The cancellation of Air Canada's morning flight to Toronto has meant more overnight layovers, while people bound for international destinations through Halifax need to plan for hours of extra travel before they leave Canadian airspace.

Air Canada accepted close to \$1.5 billion in taxpayer-funded federal assistance to stabilize its operations during the pandemic and allow the airline to restore service when safe to do so. We ask that Air Canada restore routes to pre pandemic levels and take a second look at the service levels to our region. The economic burden of these changes to the Saint John region's travel service will be significant and will weigh most heavily upon small- and medium-sized businesses.

Air Canada has reached out to us to meet. We are currently setting that up and we thank Air Canada for recognizing the seriousness of the situation and for responding promptly with action items.

The airline industry is in a state of uncertainty and complexity. Changes to routes and connections are commonplace and the aggregate of these have left us in a precarious position. Air travel is essential to growth and prosperity. About \$25 million has been invested in making our Saint John regional airport safer and more competitive, and YSJ in turn has helped accelerate the growth of local industries including the port and intermodal rail, energy, tech, hospitality, and post-secondary education.

Considering the Saint John region's growth, as a community, we would like to work together with airlines to ensure a healthy and prosperous partnership. If the decision to make these substantial cuts is based on sound business data, then we need to understand what that is so that we can help to mitigate the risk.

Earlier this summer, the New Brunswick government underscored the critical importance of airports to the provincial economy when it released its five-year strategy to grow passenger airline traffic. We're certain, then, that Premier Blaine Higgs and his government must have taken notice of these cuts and the economic hit they will have on our province.

Reversing them, or finding alternatives, is vitally important.

The upcoming Global Seafood Alliance's international conference to be hosted by Saint John in the fall of 2023 is expected to generate \$1 million while the 2029 Canada Games is expected to bring between \$110 million and \$115 million to New Brunswick. These events depend on easy air access.

The businesses, consumers and municipalities of Greater Saint John have an opportunity here to work together to convince Air Canada to restore air service. We need to keep up the dialogue and offer a consistent and compelling case for sensible year-round air service.

I mentioned earlier the federal aid to Air Canada of nearly \$1.5 billion. Surely that gives Ottawa a real interest in the operations of the airline and the role it is playing in our nation's rebound from the pandemic.

The Saint John region needs better access to flights and connections, and at departure and arrival times that are conducive to business travel. The consequences will be much more severe and long-lasting if we are left with the current service offering.

Our future prosperity depends upon air access, and we should not accept service reductions that limit our economic growth.

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