



Time to hold Air Canada accountable

DAVID DUPLISEA
COMMENTARY

Here we go again: Air Canada cuts flights to Saint John, arguing it cannot keep up its past commitments to daily service from the Port City to Toronto and Montreal.

When those flight reductions are challenged, we're treated to a presentation of irrelevant statistics by Air Canada and scolded about the Saint John region's legitimate concerns regarding the impact of limited air service on our ability to participate in the national and global economies.

The statistics Air Canada and its apologists rely on, though, confuse cause and effect.

Yes, fewer people are flying out of Saint John – because Air Canada keeps reducing the flights that it offers.

Yes, New Brunswick is losing more than a million air passengers per year to Halifax and tens of thousands more to Bangor – not because the passengers prefer that but because the flight options are not available closer to home.

Our airport, and airports elsewhere in New Brunswick, continue to wrestle with the comings-and-goings of other air carriers, mostly low-cost carriers or those offering seasonal service.

And certainly, the Saint John Airport needs to do all it can to attract and retain airlines and routes.

But there is also no denying that Air Canada, as a national air carrier that has enjoyed significant financial support from the taxpayers of this country, should be held accountable for its decisions. We fought very hard last year to restore the daily routes that Air Canada has now downgraded once again.

As a Chamber, we continue to meet with Air Canada. We need them to understand that when they cut services – particularly same-day travel to a business hub like Toronto – that this isn't just an inconvenience. Cuts like this have significant impacts on our economy and our ability to attract new businesses and people.

Consider that nearly two-thirds of travel through the Saint John airport is business travel. Our region is home to national and multinational firms that depend on air service to help grow their businesses.

The Saint John airport reports that passenger loads average 86 per cent, and many flights are sold out. So the demand is there.

Air Canada blames a shortage of pilots for why they can't uphold their earlier promises on regular and same-day air service to our city. I don't doubt that they are dealing with staffing issues – just about every company is.

But what are they doing about it? If crew shortages are to blame, how do they plan to reverse the cuts by November as they have suggested?

I think there is much more at play here. We'll continue working with Air Canada to do all that we can to help restore services for our members and the people of the Saint John region.

At the same time, It's time to change the public discourse around this. It's time for a broader, coast-to-coast conversation around Air Canada and its role as a national airline.

Saint John isn't the only city in the country short-changed on air service. It's time for everyone to pull together and lobby for a national solution.

After all, the federal government is one of Air Canada's most important shareholders. They are also the airline's banker of last resort whenever the economy sours.

A little over two years ago, the federal government purchased a \$500 million equity stake in Air Canada and gave it \$1.2 billion in preferential loans to stabilize its operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In return, Air Canada made a commitment to restart regional routes and maintain the size of its workforce.

Air Canada later withdrew from the aid agreement, but the federal government retained the shares that it had purchased, so the Canadian public still has a significant interest in the company and the ability to ask questions about whether it is meeting regional and national needs.

If you're tired of driving to Moncton, Fredericton, Halifax or Bangor to fly, or your business is suffering from a lack of local air service options, write your Member of Parliament and New Brunswick Senators while copying Air Canada.

I also encourage you to share your concerns and ideas with the airport directly by emailing info@ysjsaintjohn.ca. This will help guide the airport in ensuring available and reliable air travel in the Saint John region.

Air Canada was created to serve Canada's transportation needs. As long as it is willing to take financial aid from taxpayers, it needs to be held accountable to all those who are footing the bill.

David Duplisea is Chief Executive Officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. His commentary appears monthly.