

Rural Public Use Airports in Manitoba

Important Assets in our Communities

Planning for Sustainability



March 15, 2011

Rural Southern Public Use Airports.

ASSOCIATION of MANITOBA MUNICIPALITIES DISTRICTS

-  Year Round Asphalt
-  Year Round Grass
-  Ltd Winter Asphalt
-  Ltd Winter Grass
-  Summer Grass
-  Ltd Maint Grass



Invitations to attend meetings about funding for rural public use airports were sent to 42 airport communities and the local governments in their service areas either by letter or by email. In addition, emails were sent to people in a couple of aviation 'public' email address books.

Three meetings were held:

- Wednesday, February 16 in Shoal Lake with 37 participants representing 9 airport communities,
- Thursday, February 17 at St. Andrews with 6 participants representing 2 airport communities, and
- Monday, March 7 at St. Andrews with 16 participants representing 7 airport communities.

Participants included at least 3 mayors, 12 councillors, 2 airport managers, 2 economic development corporation members, and many flying club and airport authority members; a total of 60 in total. Gordon Tufts, policy analyst with Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation attended on Feb. 17 on behalf of the department and Minister Steve Ashton. Leanne Rowat, MLA for Minnedosa, attended the Shoal Lake meeting.

The presentation was divided into four parts with information presented followed by a discussion for each part. Information from the discussion was shared with key points recorded.

The first part of the presentation outlined the characteristics of the 42 rural public use airports included in the study; airports listed as pnr (prior notice required) and ppr (prior permission required) in the Canada Flight Supplement were not included. The following characteristics were noted:

main runway type: 17 asphalt (2 with grass or gravel edges) and 25 grass

of runways: 9 single asphalt, 8 asphalt and grass, 19 single grass, 5 two grass, and 1 three grass

runway length: asphalt 19.3 kilometers, grass runways 30.6 km, total length 50 kilometers

seasonal use: 15 all season, 12 limited winter, 13 no winter maintenance, 2 limited maintenance

fuel: 20 have 100LL, 1 has 100LL and mogas, 3 have 100LL and Jet A, 18 have no fuel

lighting: 21 lighted (12 ARCAL, 7 all/part of night, 2 prior notice), 21 unlighted

nav aids: 2 NDB, 40 VFR, GPS approaches are being developed at a few airports

A map of the 42 airports and their service areas was shared. The service areas of asphalt runway airports are all the same and based on the actual service area of the Shoal Lake Airport; the service areas of grass runway airports are smaller and the same. Clearly this is somewhat arbitrary but does indicate good service coverage of the area studied.

Four questions were suggested for the discussion:

- ▶ Which airport serves your area?
- ▶ What characteristics does it have?
- ▶ Is the service area shown on the map accurate?
- ▶ What services does it provide to the area?

Responses to the last question were shared and recorded.

Services provided by the rural public use airports represented included:

- Tourism
- Crop spraying – aerial application
- Air ambulance / Medivac
- Pilot training
- Recreation
- Maintenance shops
- Serving the petroleum industry
- Serving the livestock industry
- Farm machinery business
- Hunting and fishing outfitters
- Aerial photography
- Aircraft charter
- Policing – RCMP
- Search and rescue – CASARA
- Fuel and oil
- Aerial surveys
- Introductory flights – COPA for Kids, Young Eagles, general population
- Natural Resources – wildlife surveys, ...
- Access to seasonal property owners
- Transportation
- Hydro line and pipeline patrol

The second part of the presentation looked at sources of funding for these airports. They included private owners, local governments, flying clubs, individuals, businesses, and the Manitoba Airport Assistance Program. MAAP annually provides funds to publicly owned airports, \$1200 to grass runway airports and \$2400 to asphalt runway airports for operation and maintenance, annual application required. The focus of MAAP is on developing low cost community airports; it provides a small amount of money to a variety of airports. Some of the wording in the program description, “The sum of \$1200/\$2400 is quite a large amount of revenue for the class of airport being considered.”, suggests a program which has not kept up with the realities of Manitoba’s public use airports.

Three main questions were used to guide the discussion for this part:

- ▶ What are the challenges faced by the airport that serves your area?
- ▶ What sources of funding for operation and maintenance does your airport have?
- ▶ What things, whether operation and maintenance, or capital improvements, does your airport have difficulty funding?

The airports represented reported having difficulty funding the following things:

- Asphalt maintenance and renovation.
- Runway surfaces in general.
- Equipment purchase.
- Major equipment maintenance.
- Snow clearing.
- Fuel systems – meeting new environmental standards.
- Lighting systems – maintenance, installation.
- Terminal buildings – upkeep, renovations.
- Developing GPS approaches.
- Land purchases for airport expansion.
- Legal costs to defend freedom to fly – towers,

Part three of the presentation looked at funding options to address some of the difficulties faced by rural public use airports. While there are many issues around how the federal government funds/does not fund airports, it is extremely unlikely that any federal funding will find its way to these airports. Like Manitoba, other provinces and territories with northern isolated communities (8 of 13) own and operate northern airports. Several provinces have capital support programs for similar airports, including our neighbouring provinces Alberta and Saskatchewan. Manitoba had the **Manitoba Airports Capital Assistance Program** from the late 1990's until it was cancelled in 2004. With \$300,000 provincial funding available annually on a 50:50 funding basis \$1.3 M was allocated to 68 projects at 23 airports; at the time MACAP was undersubscribed. The **Alberta Community Airport Program** makes \$2M provincial dollars available annually on a 1/3 province, 1/3 municipal, 1/3 industry basis although some projects can receive 100% provincial funding. The program is designed to maintain and protect licensed community owned public use airports with funding for airside rehabilitation and construction requirements. The **Saskatchewan Community Airport Partnership** provides \$500,000 annually on a 50:50 basis for safety related airside improvements to regionally focussed municipal or community owned airports up to a maximum of \$200,000 (\$400,000) per project. Over four years \$1.757M in projects were completed at 20 airports across southern Saskatchewan including many airports like ours.

The discussion for the third part was directed by these questions:

- ▶ Looking back at the challenges facing our airports, which ones would be addressed by SK's CAP?
- ▶ Which ones would not be addressed?
- ▶ Of the 42 RSPUAs in Manitoba would any not qualify for CAP funds?
- ▶ What would be needed to sustain those that would not qualify for CAP?

The discussion indicated that the following funding difficulties would be addressed by a CAP program:

- Asphalt resurfacing
- Lighting
- Drainage improvements
- Asphalt maintenance – crack filling
- Development of GPS approaches

The following funding difficulties would likely not be addressed:

- **Terminal building maintenance**
- **Other building (maintenance sheds)**
- **Equipment repair and replacement**
- **Fuel facility improvement and replacement**
- **Maintenance improvement programs**
- **Land purchases**
- **Legal costs associated with freedom to fly issues like towers, ...**

The fourth part addressed what we need in Manitoba to address rural public use airport concerns. Some background information used to inform this discussion was presented. Over the last decade Manitoba has not collected airport data as Saskatchewan has. MAAP has put small amounts of money (\$1200 or \$2400) into quite a few airports, overall a small amount of money (\$50,000?) but this could be very important for the operation of some airports. Neither Alberta nor Saskatchewan continued their MAAP-like programs when they instituted a CAP program. Some airports would likely not qualify for a CAP program similar to Saskatchewan's. All airports are important, maybe not equally so, but all are an important part of a network that supports aviation from the grass roots up. The analogy used in the presentation was the circulatory system; the heart and major arteries and veins are the highest profile part of the system but the smaller arteries and veins and even the microscopic capillaries are just as essential for the overall functioning of the system. It is extremely important for aviation communities to know and communicate the service that their airport provides to the local area, to the province, and to the country! No one will do that for us; we must be our own advocates!

The discussion was entitled Moving Forward in Manitoba and was directed by these questions:

- ▶ What type(s) of funding program is needed?
- ▶ What's needed to make a strong case for this (these) funding programs?
- ▶ How can we make that case public?
- ▶ How can we keep our message consistent?
- ▶ Is a Small Rural Public Use Airport Association needed?
- ▶ Can the Manitoba Aviation Council (MAC) play a role?
- ▶ Who are our important allies?
- ▶ What are our next steps?

The discussion suggested the path forward could/should include:

- Forming a Rural Public Use Airport Association.
- Establishing a clear vision, a mandate, and goals for the Association.
- Considering other issues – proliferation of towers, federal airport funding, hangar tax rates,
- Exploring affiliation/partnership with Manitoba organizations including the AMM and MAC.
- Gathering data regarding airport use, economic activity, aircraft movements,
- Lobbying to maintain MAAP, at least for some airports.
- Lobbying to (re)institute a MACAP program.
- Approaching Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation regarding services they could offer.
- Identifying other potential sources of funding – farm chemical companies, economic development associations,

Thanks to:

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- ▶ Steve Ashton, Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation
- ▶ Manitoba Aviation Council – Craig Skonberg, Jerry Roehr, Ron Coles
- ▶ CASARA – for their facility for the St. Andrews meeting
- ▶ Gordon Tufts, Policy Consultant, MIT
- ▶ Alan Hill, Senior Policy Analyst, SK Highways and Transportation
- ▶ Janet Keim, President, Saskatchewan Aviation Council
- ▶ All who attended and shared their knowledge and ideas

Editorial comments:

Aerospace/aviation is an important industry in Manitoba contributing about \$1.6 B annually economically. Airports are an important part of that industry and a vital part of the transportation infrastructure. They provide some of the same services as highways but many other services that are unique. Ensuring their sustainability is essential to Manitoba's continued economic growth.

Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation maintains 19,000 km of all weather roads and 2200 km of winter roads for about 660,000 vehicles. There are about 2000 aircraft in Manitoba. Applying the ratio of vehicles to roads to the number of aircraft would suggest that Manitoba could/should maintain about 70 km of airport runways.

Rural public use airports are here, in most cases, at little or no cost to the province, unlike the road infrastructure. Airport runways are (arguably) simpler and cheaper to maintain than roads – no

bridges, no signs, no heavy loads, Regular operation and maintenance work is being done by local government, airport authorities, and/or volunteers.

Airport infrastructure will deteriorate without capital improvements and at some point may/will be lost. For example, Erickson Airport was built with federal funds and the life expectancy of its asphalt runway, 20 years, has now been exceeded; renovating the runway will require more financial resources than local communities in its service area can afford by themselves. Many other airports are in the same situation or will be in the next few years. This has been recognized in both Alberta and Saskatchewan. There are many success stories coming out of the CAP program in Saskatchewan; the Moose Jaw Municipal Airport is a good example.

Perhaps we need to think of airport runways as short stretches of highway that cater to those special vehicles that do not need and are not restricted by long stretches of highway, roadway, or groomed trails going to all possible destinations. It may be that our airports are not only essential but, if ALL costs are considered, also quite economical! That would make an interesting study!

Aircraft passenger carrying is still modelled after train travel. No one knows what the future of aviation will look like. There are very interesting developments in hybrid and electric aircraft occurring around the world. With almost everyone in almost constant communication through cell phone technology and the Internet it seems possible and likely that flexible travel unconstrained by fixed schedules and fixed routes will develop. Combined with GPS technology it is possible that our airports will become more accessible for travel in the future.

A Manitoba Rural Public Use Airport Association would be one way to explore the issue of rural airport capital improvement funding. Deciding whether a one issue organization with a finite life or a multiple issue, ongoing organization is the best way to proceed will be important.

Could a Rural Public Use Airport Association affiliated with MAC take on the funding issue while bolstering MAC membership and increasing its ability to deal with the other issues? I believe MAC's training capabilities could certainly be an asset to rural public use airports.

Time is of the essence, if this is to proceed, it will have to be quick. This will require a number of people to commit to do the work immediately. It will also require financial support from airport communities and local governments. It should also include some initial data collection.

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