

Air access = economic access

I'm just going to start by saying 'Air Canada', 'WestJet', 'Continental Airlines', 'Provincial Airlines', 'Air St. Pierre', 'Air Transat', 'Sky Service' and 'Sunwing' so that their media monitors pick up this article. For the airline managers who get this column in their in-tray, let me say this – Newfoundland and Labrador is the place to be.

Compared to the first half of last year, the first six months of 2009 saw an additional 4,000 room nights at hotels sold in St. John's. Gander has recently seen a spike in international aircraft traffic. The Hibernia Southern Extension memorandum of understanding was a recent step forward for our oil and gas industry. Infrastructure projects, from government alone, will total \$1.6 billion this fiscal year, and we now have a research and development corporation.

So why am I pointing this out and why should airlines care? Because there are many reasons – reasons which stand the scrutiny of economists and financial analysts and scheduling decision makers – to provide air access across Newfoundland and Labrador. As much as we need air access to do business on the mainland, people from other provinces and further locales need to get here because we're moving forward aggressively and with success.

The provincial government recently released an air access study and asked for feedback on its findings. The Board of Trade was pleased to have met with the Department of Business to advocate for specific and immediate action on the report. One of the things we said is that airlines need to know our province's story in no uncertain economic terms. That is the reality. Airlines are businesses and we need to make specific business cases to show that it is beneficial for them to fly in and out (and around) this province. It is not an emotional appeal that will win the day, it is an economic issue.

For the first time in our province's history, the economics are on our side. So now is the time to talk to airlines to make sure that their decision-makers are getting the information they need to put this province on the radar, so to speak. If managers from Air Canada and WestJet and the other carriers I mentioned earlier are reading this, let me surprise them with the following: you're providing strong service to this province and our business sector is better for it. I'll offer the Board of Trade's support to working together in a positive and productive way so we can both do even better. Local organizations working together – and working with organizations outside the province – will ensure that all of our best interests are looked after.

Why is the business community so interested in air access? Aside from the fact that it helps tourism operators thrive and survive, it is the most efficient means of conducting business inside and outside of the province. Efficiency and effectiveness are the foundations of a strong local business community that can compete nationally and internationally. Air access directly supports that.

Oil spills in Australia are being cleaned with products from Bishop's Falls. Labrador ski and snowmobile trails are being continually upgraded. The province has a new ocean technology strategy that can have pan-provincial benefits. Business leaders from all parts of the province have been recognized as top CEOs. In the next couple of days, the Southeastern United States-Canadian Provinces Alliance conference will be held here. These are just a few of the many reasons why flights in and out of all parts of this province are necessary, and are beneficial to business and to all residents.

Here is the long and short of it: Newfoundland and Labrador must be proactive to both enhance air access and maintain our current air service levels.