

Chair's Column, The Telegram – June 5-2010

From here to there: floating and flying

“It either has to float or fly.” I have uttered those words many times as chair of the Board of Trade when talking about transportation issues in this province. The Board of Trade is very active on transportation files because, in reality, everyone is affected by it living on an island. If it doesn't go by boat or by plane, it doesn't get on or off the island portion of the province.

The province received a boost a couple of weeks ago when the federal government announced that it would be chartering two vessels and retiring two vessels that had more than served their time in the Marine Atlantic fleet. This is a welcome announcement because of anticipated fuel efficiencies achieved through the two new vessels (reduce our fuel surcharge please, Government of Canada). It is also welcome because there will be greater commercial capacity, so our companies can export more, while we ensure food security and other essential items get to the island. And certainly we welcome environmental benefits from more efficient vessels.

That's not to say that all questions are answered and the issue is resolved. The Board has been forcefully pushing the federal government to invest in Marine Atlantic because of the economic benefit it has to the rest of Canada. Federal politicians will make decisions based on mainland concerns and mainland companies are putting billions of dollars worth of goods into Newfoundland via the ferry. Nothing in the government's announcement made me think that they are accepting that argument, and that is a concern because it might take another crisis situation in the fleet to get action, instead of recognition of an opportunity.

Hopefully the upcoming five year strategy for Marine Atlantic will have supporting economic growth as a founding principle for its future. The Board looks forward to seeing that strategy soon, and learning more about how the economic corridor connecting the mainland to the island will evolve. Marine Atlantic has put together a respected team at the executive and senior management level and the crown corporation needs to have the both the funding and the vision to execute their responsibilities.

Something else that the Board has been working on improving is air access. This is something that we have been pressing with the province, and have been partnering with the St. John's International Airport Authority in lobbying efforts to enhance local landing systems.

Specifically though, I'd like to discuss the speech of Air Canada's president and chief executive officer, Calin Rovinescu, to the Board of Trade this week. Including its partners, Air Canada operates more than 150 scheduled flights each week from St. John's to other places in Canada, flying about 750,000 people to and from St. John's last year. Last year, the airline carried over 570,000 kilograms of freight into St John's and over 260,000 kilograms outbound.

So why is the chair of the Board of Trade talking about Air Canada? Because it is a key component of our work on behalf of the business community. Yes, it is convenient and easy to deride Air Canada. But that doesn't help us maintain the St. John's-London Heathrow direct service that this community fought hard to win back. What will help is using the service and proving to Air Canada executives that this flight is useful for personal, tourism and business travel.



Chair's Column, The Telegram – June 5-2010

Welcoming and using an international flight helps our members do business, and that's the reason we exist. Keep this in mind: some people will need that flight. Some opportunities for businesses (and the people who work in those businesses who are your neighbours and friends) might come out of that flight. Maybe it is for personal reasons like access to family overseas. Maybe it will help a company land new business and create more employment. Let's be a part of that success. Being a part of success is the reason why the Board of Trade continues to advocate for funding for an enhanced landing system proposed for St. John's airport. The landing system would help hundreds more flights get in and out of St. John's each year. Imagine, we have it within our reach to shed forever, our reputation for fog-bound flights-- what an impact on business and leisure travelers. These are the types of successes we're working towards. This work needs to continue, to benefit the community and the businesses and residents who live here.

Let's take a lesson from our collective success with enhancements to Marine Atlantic. We will press for our needs, but we will be vigilant to do it with factual arguments and show strength in our local market. Then we will get what we need, and keep it.