

Debert Airport Report to Council Committee

On March 10, 2022 Colchester's Economic Development Officer, Jenn Martin made a presentation to council committee to provide an update on the operation of the Debert Airport. The purpose of the report was to provide Council with an overview of Debert Airport operations, revenues, and expenses; and to inform Council of facility improvements needed and associated capital investment required.

OVERVIEW

The Debert Airport, formerly known during World War II as RCAF Station Debert, was purchased by the Government of Nova Scotia for development as the Debert Air Industrial Park, in 1972.

Since 1972, Debert Airport has been primarily used as a general aviation club and flight training school, overseen by the Truro Flying Club (TFC).

In 2008, the airport's ownership, as part of the Debert Business Park, was transferred to the Municipality of the County of Colchester from the Province.

In 2020, the Municipality of Colchester purchased and renovated an airside hangar property to provide opportunity for business development at the Debert Airport. This building is now known as the Debert Aviation Centre (DAC) and hosts two small aviation companies, Leading Edge Geomatics, and Oceanside Aviation Ltd.

Debert Airport is a busy regional airport, typically reporting over 30,000 annual aircraft movements per year. Impacts of Covid-19 have decreased traffic at the Airport.

The majority aircraft movement is from the Debert Flight Centre (DFC) training program.

Debert Aviation Centre (DAC) tenants commenced business operations at the Debert Airport in October 2021. The anticipated flight movement of current DAC clients is approximately 2000 per year.

The airport has three runways. Runway 09-27 has retained its original 5,000 feet length; Runway 16-34 is 4,500 feet in length and Runway 05-23 is no longer in use due to deteriorated conditions.

Runways 09-27 and 16-34 were last resurfaced in the early 1970's

Debert Aviation Centre:

In addition to the airport operations, the anticipated Debert Aviation Centre (DAC) operating costs are estimated at \$100,000 annually.

Currently, DAC leases provide \$77,627 of annual revenue. Once the DAC is operating at full capacity, it is projected to have an annual lease revenue of \$410,700.

Portions of the DAC still require finish work to accommodate future tenants. Proposed upgrade expenses for additional work at the hangar will be brought forward to Council prior to capital budget.

Opportunities:

In 2018, JCS Consulting prepared the Debert Airport Business Development Opportunity Report. The report outlined potential uses and growth opportunities available.

In 2019, the Municipality commissioned Chris Lowe Group to perform an independent economic impact assessment of JSC's identified commercial opportunities. The following table summarizes the identified business opportunities for Debert Airport and the associated economic impact:

Additional direct revenue opportunities for the Debert Airport could include aircraft tie-down leases at DAC, airport landing fees and AV gas fuel sales at DAC.

In a typical year, TFC sells anywhere from 75-100,000 litres of AV gas. Colchester does not receive profit from these sales.

LIMITATIONS:

Major runway improvements are required. The last major capital investment was in 1992 with the resurfacing of Taxiway Alpha and a portion of the apron.

In the spring of 2017, Colchester commissioned an Airfield Pavement Assessment Study. Findings from the study recommend milling and asphalt overlay of Runway 09-27, 16-34, Taxiway B and the Apron Taxiway. Their recommendation is permanent closure of Runway 05-23.

The Debert Airport runway upgrades are estimated at \$8.12 million dollars.

A new lighting system and fencing are also recommended. Replacement of airfield lighting, new fencing and stormwater upgrades are estimated at \$1.46 million dollars.

Total recommended capital investment is estimated at 9.58 million dollars.

Federal funding is not available. Colchester applied for infrastructure funding to Transport Canada in the Fall of 2018 under the Airports Capital Assistance Program (ACAP), however, it did not meet the commercial airport eligibility requirements to qualify for funding.

Subsequently, a preliminary application for funding was submitted July 2019 to the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) via the Innovative Communities Fund (ICF). Funding was not granted.

Most recently, in spring of 2021, a meeting was held with local ACOA representatives to discuss reapplication through the ICF. It was determined there is no accessible funding for small airport infrastructure improvements currently.

Council has identified the development of the Debert Airport as a strategic priority during their four-year term. To meet these growth expectations, dedicated resources and restructuring of airport operations will be required.

Resurfacing of the runways, apron and taxiways is required to accommodate new commercial aviation clients and to service our existing tenants (TFC, DFC, Leading Edge, and Oceanside Aviation).

Most aviation related businesses are unable to operate out of Debert Airport due to the current facility conditions.

Comprehensive maintenance services for the airfield are also required. Regular runway/apron sweeping, along with

24-hour snow removal services are necessities for increased business operations.

CONCLUSIONS:

The Debert Airport is a valued community and economic asset to Colchester County. There is significant potential for business development and growth, however, key infrastructure improvements and capital investments are required.

The future of the Debert Airport is reliant on a clear and focused vision. In its current state, it is unlikely that Colchester will see economic growth unless capital investment is made.

OPERATIONS

The Municipality has an existing contract with the TFC as the Debert Airport Operator. This contract expires March 31, 2022.

As the Airport Operator, TFC is responsible for airport security, minor facility maintenance, radio communications, public communications and promotion, aircraft movement, entry gate access, pest control, maintenance of the jet fuel tank and jet fuel sales, inspection and reporting of fuel tanks as per federal regulations, and operations of the airport terminal. They are paid an annual fee of \$17,000 (plus HST).

TFC is given exclusive rights to sublease tie-down spaces on Debert Airport property, which provides TFC with an annual revenue opportunity of \$9,000.

TFC is paid a Jet A Fuel

dispensing fee of .10 cents/litre. In 2020, Colchester sold 19,600L of Jet A, paying TFC \$1,960 in dispensing fees.

In addition to TFC operations and management fees, Colchester subcontracts independent services for snow removal, grass mowing and runway approach maintenance.

Revenues (2021):

Jet Fuel Sales, \$34,298; Airport Leases, \$15,079; Jet Fuel Sales, Property Tax, \$5,259 for total revenue of \$54,636.

Expenses (2021):

Airport Management Fee, \$17,000; Snow removal, \$14,100; Public Works Staff salaries for patching, grass mowing, etc, \$19,360; Lighting maintenance, \$2,322; runway approach maintenance, \$5,000; Insurance, \$7,400; Jet Fuel, \$16,192, Other maintenance, \$5,430 for total expenses of \$86,804.

In 2021, the Debert Airport operated at a loss of \$32,168.



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