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Airport looks past loss of Air Canada

ABBOTSFORD: Passenger volumes still soaring at Valley's 'no-hassle' alternative to YVR



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THE FRASER VALLEY

The loss of Air Canada as a primary scheduled carrier would knock the wings off the business plan at most Canadian airports and quickly dash any dreams the enterprise had of soaring like an eagle.

Instead, such a loss would leave the airport flopping around like a barnyard turkey.

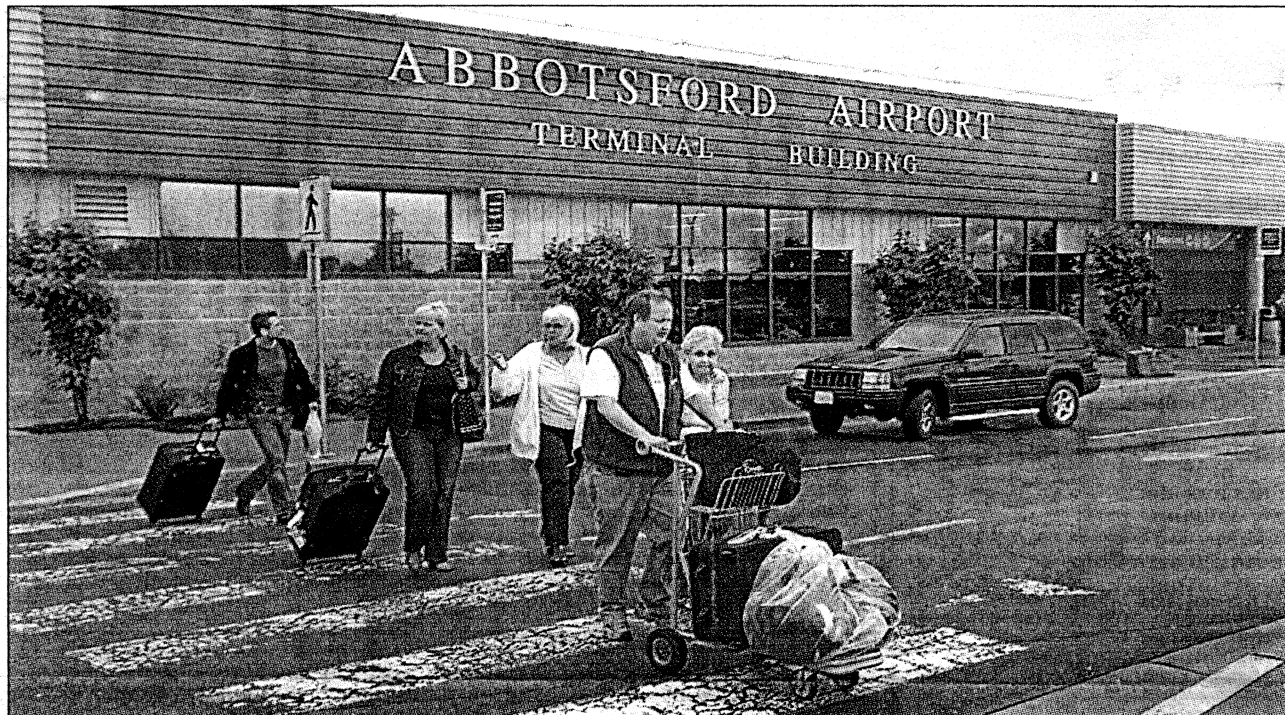
It's been only a few days since Abbotsford International Airport (YXX) lost Air Canada as one of its two primary scheduled airlines, but the plucky regional facility isn't about to dump its eagle dreams just yet.

"There's no doubt this loss of service will have an impact on our passenger numbers, but it certainly won't impact the demand of Fraser Valley residents for a Fraser Valley airport," says Jay Teichroeb, economic development manager for the City of Abbotsford, which owns the airport.

Since a \$120-million long-term master development plan was unveiled 12 months ago, Abbotsford airport has been capturing increasing public and aviation sector attention.

And that's been warranted because the airport has had solid business numbers backing it up.

In the decade since ownership was transferred from Ottawa in 1997 and a new terminal con-



Passengers from a WestJet flight stream out of the terminal at Abbotsford Airport yesterday. City and airport officials are talking to scheduled and charter airlines in a bid to replace passenger volumes expected to be lost after the recent withdrawal of Air Canada.

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structed, annual passenger volumes have grown from 77,400 to 502,000 in 2006.

In the first five months of this year, those volumes are up by a further 17.4 per cent over the same period last year.

Clearly, the airport's marketing pitch as the "no hassle alternative" to Vancouver International works.

However, in early spring Air Canada dropped a bomb on Abbotsford airport by announcing it would cancel its remaining three daily Abbotsford-to-Calgary flights as of May 31, having previously cut a daily Abbotsford-to-Toronto flight in January.

"We were completely surprised by

that announcement," airport manager Mike Pasto tells me.

"Even their local staff and management were surprised because their load factors were pretty healthy here."

Air Canada's official explanation was that its passengers preferred to fly out of Vancouver International, so there wasn't enough demand out of Abbotsford.

However, many in the Fraser Valley strongly suspect that the pull-out was due more to the fact that even though it had 15 per cent of Abbotsford's passenger market, Air Canada wasn't competing well enough with Calgary-based WestJet.

This airline is thriving in Abbotsford and had most of the remaining 85 per cent of passenger market share, with two daily flights to Edmonton and five per day to Calgary.

Now, in a bid to replace Air Canada, the city and Abbotsford Airport Authority are talking to both scheduled and charter airlines throughout North America.

Nor are they ignoring overseas markets.

"Because of our large Indo-Canadian population in the Valley, we can see a service between here and India, for example," Teichroeb says.

The airport is also developing two business parks on-site with private

investors which, when fully leased in three to five years, could contain as many as 300 varied businesses and up to 1,000 employees.

And the airport already houses a variety of aviation-related companies that employ about 1,600 people.

Teichroeb also says that the airport now generates close to \$500 million annually for the local economy.

Air Canada? Who needs 'em?

If you have a story idea or noteworthy item about anything going on in the Fraser Valley, you can e-mail Brian at blewis@png.canwest.com