

The story of the Waterville Airport closure

Annapolis Valley Flying Association

The Michelin Plant in Waterville N.S. has a potential future expansion with an expressed 2-10 year timeline. Although the plant owns significant acreages to the east, south and west, Michelin feels it only makes sense for them to expand north on the land they don't own. The land they want belongs to Kings County and is occupied by our 50 year old active vibrant municipal airport CCW3.

The potential Michelin expansion along with an airport relocation study (CBCL study) was announced in May 2012 jointly by Kings County Warden Diana Brothers and the provincial NDP government. Work had happened behind the scenes without airport stakeholder knowledge, between the Provincial NDP government, the county and Michelin to reach that point. After the announcement, the airport users formed a stakeholder group and got involved. To date the stakeholders have worked consistently and supportively with the municipality over these past 2 years to support the possible Michelin expansion and see our viable municipal airport continue to grow and thrive.

Our airport CO-OP board developed a Unified Airport Policy Statement regarding a potential relocation. This was written to clarify our position and demonstrate our support for the benefits of a Michelin expansion to our county. We wanted to be clear that we valued the importance of a potential Michelin expansion.

The airport has seen strong growth in the 10 years leading up to the May 2012 announcement. The airport relocation study done by CBCL, released in May of 2013, was favorable toward the airport and recommended relocation not closure. It demonstrated that the airport has a direct economic output of one million dollars annually to the valley economic region on an annual county subsidy of 50 thousand dollars.

The CBCL study clearly shows the airport to be an important economic asset to the area. The value to replace the airport, as highlighted in the CBCL study, is \$12 million. The CBCL study clearly states the importance of getting on with a decision over the airports fate: move it to a new location or leave it as is. Delaying the decision over the fate of the airport by any significant time period will see the airport decline given uncertainty.

In May 2012, under the cloud of an uncertain future, after the Kings County/Provincial Government announcement of a possible Michelin expansion, all growth ceased. Waterville airport operations are now in decline given all this, and an intervening 2 years of lack of direction from the Kings municipal and Nova Scotia provincial governments.

We have endeavored as airport stakeholders, through our airport management co-op, Annapolis Valley Flying Association and the Hangar Owners Group to engage the county council in an airport relocation advisory committee. There have been four of 11 councilors that see the value of the airport and are keen to push for relocation options. They have worked with the airport stakeholders to develop terms of reference and choose committee members. We felt we were on the verge of this committee being formed when the council met on March 10th 2014 and decided in camera to close the airport as of September 30th 2014. As a result the stake holder input process has been derailed.

In light of this development, the Hangar Owners Group sought legal help. Our primary interest as hangar owners is to protect our building investment. Collectively there is \$1.5 million in hangar investment at stake.

The county has been clear that they do not plan to compensate anyone for their hangars if the airport closes. The hangars sit on leased land from the county, governed by lease agreements with a 10 year term. The eviction clause in the hangar footprint land lease agreements is only triggered by airport closure. As good tenants we can only be told to remove our hangars if the airport closes.

Our secondary interest is the survival of a general aviation airport in Kings County. Through review of the pertinent airport governing documents and agreements of operation, our lawyer has advised us that the county is not in a position of authority to close the airport before the expiration of the current management agreement between the county and the Waterville Airport Cooperative. That agreement expires **September 30th 2015.**

The Hangar Owners Group instructed our lawyer to write to the county and inform them of this. They replied and we are moving into a mediation phase. Our strategy, at this point, is to gain an extra year of airport operations through the legal challenge. We can then stand up the airport relocation advisory committee to help inform the Kings County council and the Provincial government of the value of this highly used and viable municipal airport. Our goal is a provincially funded relocation of the airport, from the promised extra tax dollars from a Michelin expansion.

Our legal challenge will very likely go before a judge if the mediation phase fails. This is going to cost the stakeholders a significant amount in legal fees. COPAs Freedom to Fly board has generously approved a 50% matched funding of these fees.

Our 3,500 foot paved jewel of a municipal airport in the center of the beautiful Annapolis Valley is on the brink. We need the help of all interested persons and aviators. If you or your groups are interested in financially supporting our defense effort please contact:

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Bullet summary:

It is disappointing that Municipality of Kings has spent almost 2 years waffling and dragging decision making in a manner that:

- A strong viable \$12 million rural airport is closing – one of the strongest such airports in Canada.
- Refused to allow councilors to discuss the WACL Unified Policy Statement.
- Most existing operations, businesses, investors and assets will be dispersed and difficult to reassemble.
- Many new local rural business investments were delayed, and several moved outside the province.
- All existing hangar owners poised to lose everything invested – \$1.5 million.
- Several related small business being forced to close (and possibly into bankruptcy).
- Many existing local rural jobs lost.