THE SHERBROOKE REGIONAL AIRPORT: THE SAD SAGA OF THE “LARGE” LITTLE AIRPORT THAT REMAINS STRANDED IN LEFT FIELD

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A Brief History and Overview

In July, 1994 the Federal Minister of Transport, the Honorable Douglas Young made public the new National Airports Policy. This document proposed sweeping changes for the control and operation of the country’s airports within a time frame ending no later than March, 31 1997. One of the facilities most affected by the new doctrine is the Sherbrooke Regional Airport whose leadership shortly faces negotiations with the federal government with the view to accepting the transfer of ownership of the facility and operating it on a locally-sustained basis.

The Sherbrooke Airport (as it was then known), started operations in 1963 following an agreement between Ville de Sherbrooke and the federal Ministry of Transport. Under the terms of the pact, in fact a 40 year lease renewable every ten years, the city assumed responsibility for the day-to-day administration and management of the facility, and in areas where aviation safety was a factor, agreed to function in accordance with the various national safety norms set by Transport Canada, paying $1 per year for the leasing arrangement. The government remained the proprietor of all the facilities (ground and buildings) whose construction it had largely financed starting in the early 60s, and provided various essential technical services at its own expense. Initial-phase building projects continued until 1965 when the present air terminal facility was completed. Over subsequent years, other minor building took place mainly in the construction of storage hangars for small
planes and in the building of a tower facility to house the Flight Service professionals. Now, as 1995 draws to a close, funds have been committed to build a major new hangar facility (about 12,000 sq. ft.) in the near future (perhaps in the Spring of 1996), to help fill Sherbrooke Regional Airport’s (so called since the fall of 1994) new vocation as a center for small aviation building, maintenance and upgrading.

Airport Location and Services

The airport saga started in 1958 when the conservative MP for Sherbrooke riding, Mr. Maurice Allard, urged that such a venue be created. He had the support of the mayor of Sherbrooke, Mr. Armand Nadeau, and subsequently the federal Minister of Transport at the time, the Honorable George Hees. The city proceeded to buy some 2,000 acres at the eastern extreme of its territory along Route 112 about 5 km from the village of East Angus. In 1959, it ceded 1,400 acres to Transport Canada to develop the necessary infrastructures. When one considers the airport’s somewhat distant location in 1995, given that the area’s industrial parks and economic growth areas are on the western fringe of the city, it is hard to imagine how eerily far away the site must have seemed in the 60s. Today the airport is under 30 km from any major point in the Greater Sherbrooke Region and can be reached in between 15 and 25 minutes drive. At the time it was built there were no major highways in the area.

For most of the following 30 years, the airport remained underused and operated at a negative cost-effective ratio (like most similar facilities) in terms of taxpayer (federal and municipal) investment. There was a continual federal presence 24 hours per day in the form of the Flight Service Station staff, those who give landing instructions and weather information, help file flight plans for pilots and in general assure complete aviation safety and pertinent information to all aviators in the area. Because there was no permanent staff at the airport, the FSS people helped in other ways doing everything from reserving cars to booking hotel rooms when asked.

The Sherbrooke Flight Service Station, which services nine different local area regions commenced operations shortly after the airport opened, coinciding with the closing of the Megantic Flight Service Station. In short, the feds looked after technical matters at their own expense while the city looked after all ground operations and paid for their operating costs. Of an approximate annual
revenue budget of $280,000 in the years 1990 to 1994, the City of Sherbrooke contributed some $115,000. Another $85,000 came from fuel sale profits, and the remainder came from a whole variety of sources: modest contributions from surrounding municipalities (about $25,000); rentals (about $25,000 from the federal government and about $5,000 more from small hangar use); and the remainder from grants and leasing arrangements with the mechanical and restaurant services.

Administration and Initial Activities

Initially (1963–1967) the engineering department of the city ran the airport. This arrangement ushered in what was to be followed by various and varying administrative regimes some of which were private, some of which were led by functionaries of the city and, for the five years or so prior to the arrival of a full time staff person, by the MRC Haut St-François in nearby Cookshire.

In 1976, the city set up an airport operating committee which in 1980 became the Comité administratif de l’aéroport de Sherbrooke (CAAS). This body has been historically chaired by a municipal councillor from Sherbrooke, the largest single financial contributor, and it also contains at any given time two other Sherbrooke municipal councillors and the various mayors of the contributing towns. It wasn’t until August, 1994, some 30 years after its inauguration, that the airport was ever run on a full-time basis directly from the facility itself. A report commissioned in 1993 had recommended this action as well as outlined certain poles of development that the airport could pursue.

Over this entire period some minor carrier link scheduling was unsuccessfully attempted. For example, between Montreal, Quebec City and La Tuque; and later by Bar Harbor Airlines between Boston and Sherbrooke. Still later a Sherbrooke-Montreal run lived briefly.

The Stratem-RCMP Report: a strategy for the future

In 1993 a Strategic Planning Report, prepared by a Montreal planning firm and a Sherbrooke-based management enterprise was presented. The document, which cost $100,000 to prepare (in large part financed by the federal government through Minister Jean Charest’s offices) summarized the airport’s past, outlined its strengths and weaknesses and made several recommendations for
its future development. Among other things it called for; the hiring of a manager on a full-time basis to develop a permanent office at the airport itself; repatriating all the administrative records and accounting procedures from the MRC Haut St-François; developing the necessary airport infrastructures in line with other similar airport facilities; generating a network of contacts in the world of aviation and at Transport Canada; and developing a higher level of visibility for the facility both locally and with possible future users. The final recommendation called for the preparation of a business plan which would outline what the airport could realistically expect to achieve. In effect, the aforementioned recommendations essentially formed my mandate for the six months I was at the airport.

What the Report’s findings, in fact, pointed out without saying so was the lack of a developed airport ethic in the Sherbrooke area, a situation which means that the facility is virtually never contemplated as a means of travel or transport, or for other purposes such as aircraft repair and maintenance. Only those who have occasion to fly-in use it, and only local area recreational and in-transit pilots take advantage of its existence. Very few companies or institutional personnel make use of it. Attempts to highlight the airport’s existence in the early 1990s in the form of air shows attracted thousands of single-day visitors but with no other apparent affect, and on reflection (in part due to inclement weather conditions), at considerable cost.

This situation of under-utilization differs greatly from that of our immediate neighbors to the south. Even the facilities found at smaller urban areas in New England, like Portland, Maine and Lebanon, New Hampshire, enjoy a staggering thirty times more aircraft movements annually than Sherbrooke. Slightly larger areas like Burlington, Vermont and Hartford, Connecticut are light years ahead in passenger and cargo volume and in military use. All these areas have a highly developed airport ethic. Whether a travelling student, a person on a business mission or someone on a tourist or other form of jaunt, everyone in the United States has a knowledge of where the closest airport is located. And yet the Sherbrooke Regional Airport’s single runway can handle any major modern jet or large, cumbersome military bomber or transport plane. For example, its dimensions are 6,000 ft. by 150 ft. The longest landing strip at Hartford, the largest and busiest of the four American facilities previously mentioned is only 5,000 ft. in length.

The Stratem-RCMP Report (and other close observers since on
the scene) also called for the following types of airport enhancement activities:

- to develop competitive charter services to select cities which are regular business destinations for the region’s enterprises and which are economically feasible to undertake;
- to develop tourism, convention, athletic team and other recreational charter services;
- to develop liaisons with all proximate Ontario, New Brunswick and New England flying clubs. This exposure to student pilots who would stop at Sherbrooke to get their log books stamped and to fuel up would be beneficial for future use, in making the airport and its facilities better known;
- to develop an enhanced military fueling service. A major source of revenue for the airport is in fuel sales. The 1994 sale of some 400,000 liters of fuel produced a tidy profit as previously indicated. Military planes travel frequently over Sherbrooke going between St. Hubert and the Maritimes. An increase in fueling opportunities has many beneficial affects;
- go after the New England small aircraft market for repairs and refittings. With a currency discount of 35%, there is a great deal of possibility here including tourist stop-overs;
- develop a pilot training school for interested Western European, South American and African governments and private interests.

A Second-Tier Partner In Local Development

It is important to note the geographical location of Sherbrooke, the occupations of its greater overall population and the particular way the area functions in a business sense. It is also important to be aware of the fact that the airport itself, despite its excellent runway (now beginning to deteriorate) is not competitive. For example, no commuter-type small jet planes, even executive jets like Lears and Beechcraft, can presently be parked indoors in the winter. Neither can they be de-iced or battery-started because Sherbrooke simply does not have the ground power facilities to do so. In mid-winter 1995, a modern Canadian Forces fighter jet landed at Sherbrooke for re-fueling. After the pilots had eaten, they went to continue their voyage westward. Because their battery was low and couldn’t start their plane, they had to radio St. Hubert Airforce Base for help. Four hours later a truck arrived to start their jet. Will these in-transit pilots ever descend in Sherbrooke with the same type of aircraft again if they can avoid it?
Compared to many other regional airports, therefore, the Sherbrooke facility has become a minor player in the region’s economic development aspirations. In the area of cargo for example, it is simply a nonexistent issue. Part of this is because the region is so well served by its network of modern highways and fleets of trucks. The disappearance of regular rail service plays no role at all at this time. To a great deal of the work force, the overwhelming majority of which is employed by one form of public enterprise or another, it is more profitable to take one’s own car at $.33+ per km mileage allowance to travel to Quebec City, Montreal, Ottawa or other appropriate destinations.

At present there is no developed infrastructure around the airport with which to attract and house any industries whatsoever. Even as the new hangar facility project is on the boards, Sherbrooke is rapidly losing out in many of its potential missions by more aggressive regions like Moncton which is pursuing business development in Western Europe among other areas. Sherbrooke’s economic developers are also being beaten to the punch by other cities whose emerging ethic is to share, not “steal” or wrest away good prospects which may appear on the horizon. A case in point is Diamond Aircraft, a German-based manufacturer of light-weight two-seater airplanes (Sherbrooke is also planning to attract this type of small aircraft construction). Diamond chose to locate its operations in a vacant plant near the airport in London, Ontario. The company’s managers believed that flight training programs were the best promotion for their aircraft but the local community college in London has no such program. London’s development group got in touch with North Bay’s economic planners and to make a long story short, arranged for Canadore College in North Bay to add additional flight training studies to its curriculum at the Canadian Forces Base in North Bay. This joint action made the Diamond project satisfactory to all concerned, with as many positive spin-offs as possible. Our area lacks this sense of reciprocally-beneficial cohesion or indeed the visionary rainmakers needed to carry out its various projects.

It is important to highlight it, because this is the cornerstone reason for Transport Canada’s reasons for removing its services from the Sherbrooke Regional Airport, that there is simply not enough passenger-travel prospects to or from Sherbrooke to ever contemplate any form of scheduled service. There is one further caveat: the profile of the type of enterprise that sets up business at an airport industrial park. The Lebanon Business Park, located
next to the airport, within 3 km of the interstate and within a short walk of the airport itself, contains 48 flourishing enterprises in its spaces which can accommodate a maximum of 52. None of these 48 firms is airline-industry related in any way. They are there because the facility is ideally located for executive jet travel and shipping purposes. In Sherbrooke’s case, it can’t survive without setting up an infrastructure which is directly related to the aircraft industry.

As 1995 comes to an end therefore, so does the federal presence at the airport. What was a 24-hour babysitting security service paid for by Ottawa, reduced to 18 hours of daily operation on December 1, 1994 will be totally eliminated in September, 1995 leaving it up to the airport itself to find money to offer this essential service in whatever form it takes.

In short, for it to survive in the future, the Sherbrooke Regional Airport has got to go out and find users for the various services it hopes to offer. Its facilities must meet appropriate needs to make it more important than other airports in the region, and it has to develop other related services in the general area adjacent to the airport. It doesn’t have the luxury of a Lebanon Airport for example where sheer commuter demand and business interests that are relevant to being located near airport transportation are important. But above all the potential users of the facility and the cities and towns which surround it must make a commitment to support it financially until its services become self-supporting.

The Sherbrooke Regional Airport Today: facing reality

The Sherbrooke Regional Airport today finds itself at a crossroads, representing both an exhilarating challenge and a series of valid reasons for concern about its survival. The challenge is there: to enhance the basic facilities and to compete effectively with other similar airports all of which are being disenfranchised in one way or another by the rationalization decisions of Transport Canada.

Transport Canada is the federal government department which has made the most complete overhaul of its policies in the history of the federal system. While Sherbrooke is being hit hard by its decisions, no one can say that the government’s moves are discriminatory. Even in the most strongly established Liberal government bastions across Canada, the airports in those areas are being carefully assessed in the context of the National Airports Policy.
The National Airports Policy

The February 1994 Federal Budget called on Transport Canada to review the potential for commercialization of a number of its major activities without affecting the safety and security of Canadians. Among its subjects of deliberation were: the role and structure of Crown corporations; the future of passenger rail service; the reduction or elimination of most subsidies with a view to a better balance between user-pay and user-say; the commercialization of airport operations and so on. In the area of Canada’s air navigation system and its airports, a document was produced, the National Airports Policy. This paper apparently (because that is what the document claims) established the first clear framework for the federal government’s role in airports, shifting the traditional role from that of owner and operator, to landlord or regulator.

Currently there are 726 certified airports in Canada. Transport Canada owns, operates or subsidizes 150 of them. They range in size from Lester B. Pearson International Airport in Toronto to mere grass strips. When one notes that 94 per cent of all air passengers and cargo are handled at 26 airports, it can be objectively said that expenditures on under-used facilities have unfairly burdened the Canadian taxpayer. For more than 60 years, the federal government has assumed responsibilities for airports with no consistency or focus on a clearly-defined operational policy framework or system. One of the clear intentions of the new document is to transfer ownership of regional, local, and other smaller airports to regional interests.

Under the NAP, Sherbrooke is classified as a Small Airport, a facility which does not offer regularly scheduled air traffic. According to the federal definition, Small Airports serve mainly local interests especially in the areas of general and pleasure aviation. In some cases, like Sherbrooke, these operations are run on behalf of the federal government by a municipality or other local entity. Some receive local funding (as does Sherbrooke); others receive federal funding (which Sherbrooke does not). Under the plan all authority for running facilities like the one at Sherbrooke will be transferred to local authorities by 1997, but probably sooner. At Sherbrooke the federal government pays the salaries of the Flight Service staffers as well as its other ground technicians (about $400,000) per year as well as the rentals for the spaces they use (as previously noted).

When the FSS service was partially shut down on December 1, 1994 (11 PM to 7 AM shift), it meant that the Sherbrooke Regional
Airport temporarily had no overnight security for the first time in its history. A new arrangement had to be quickly made at the airport’s own expense. With the full FSS shut-down in September, new monies will have to be found locally to pay for whatever replacement service is implemented.

The closing of the Flight Service Station in Sherbrooke is justified by the historic lack of aircraft movements since the airports' creation in 1963. According to the new federal policy, an FSS will be maintained only when there is a minimum of 20,000 annual movements per year of which 7,500 are in the form of scheduled passenger traffic. In instances where there is no scheduled passenger traffic, there must be between 40,000 and 60,000 annual movements to maintain the service. Between 1963 and 1970, Sherbrooke recorded an annual average of about 10,000 movements. Between 1970 and 1975, the movements varied between 19,000 and 37,000. Since then they have fluctuated between 15,000 and 26,000 despite an increased military presence and the holding of air shows.

Clearly much of the Canadian air transportation system is over-built. Apart from the airport-user statistic previously mentioned, it is important to stress that not only facilities like Sherbrooke's are affected. The country's entire transportation network is being evaluated. When one learns that 84 per cent of all rail traffic uses only 33% per cent of the railway lines; and 84 per cent of all marine traffic passes through only 30 of 300 public ports, the new federal directives are truly undertaken on a national scale and in the national fiscal interest.

The Immediate Affects of the Policy on Sherbrooke

Clearly, if there is ever to be a community consensus to maintain and develop the Sherbrooke Regional Airport, now is the time. The many recommendations which have been brought forward by people for the last 20 years must be acted upon or it will be too late. Business possibilities and revenue-generating opportunities must be developed. And these activities must be carried on without too greatly penalizing the traditional recreational users who cannot be expected to assume too great a share of the operating costs.

Among the new revenue generating services which are possible, are such things as daily, weekly and monthly in-door parking fees, a complete range of small craft mechanical and other services, wing de-icing and power generating services, stepped-up fuel sales

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created by increased activities and so on. Much of the foregoing rests on the construction of a new hangar and the services found within it.

Sherbrooke’s authorities are also expecting some form of “honorable” settlement from Transport Canada, financial help which would leave areas such as the runway and taxiway in peak operational condition prior to the transfer. Already several arrangements have been negotiated. These include the installing of an ARCAL (aircraft radio communications for landing) system which allows the pilot to trigger the runway lights by radio frequency when approaching at night, resulting in considerable electricity savings because the lights don’t have to be always left on. This means savings in costly replacements too. With the FSS closing, Transport Canada has already agreed to leave a great deal of its air guidance equipment in place and to help streamline it for future use.

On the budget side, without going into all of the details, some $80,000 more will have to be found immediately (in addition to Sherbrooke’s grant, fuel sales and rentals) just to break even because of the loss of the federal presence, not counting any building or other physical improvements or acquisitions. Since the facility has an abundance of land, selling a sizeable chunk to the local military command for their purposes might be one way of alleviating the financial strain. But Canada’s military too are rationalizing and they are not in a “buying” mode. And any use they could make of the grounds surrounding the airport must be made in the light of strict environmental standards compliance (excessive noise, tank track degradation etc.) It does not appear likely in the immediate future either, that there will be any widescale commercial use of airport land.

Conclusion

Sherbrooke Regional Airport is not only still stranded in left field, it is truly at a crossroads as well. By the end of 1995, it will be a facility without its traditional and principal base of support, the federal government. Apart from its too small base of regular users whose activities cannot pay for a fraction of its operating costs and maintenance, the facility will continue to face severe challenges on all fronts both to be competitive and to survive and to be upgraded into a desirable and attractive facility to use.

It needs a great deal of business and activity to survive. It needs a great deal of physical enhancement to attract business and activ-
Ities. It has very little community support or understanding. It in many ways is the victim of parochial pettiness. While it has been rightfully Sherbrooke’s facility because the city put its money where its mouth is, this perceived dominance and management by “Big Brother” in the context of the immediate area’s two MRCs and 35-odd municipalities, has caused resentment over the years throughout the area.

A major overall cross-boundary economic plan with the airport’s role in it is needed. This facility is simply too well located in the middle of the North American continent for it not to remain alive and actively flourish. Petty squabbling and minor parochial issues must be put aside in favour of the greater overall good. Apart from the traditional federal government commitment, the reason it has survived so long in relatively good financial condition has been because of the unwavering support provided by Ville de Sherbrooke.

**RESUME**

Il s’agit ici d’un document de travail pour une étude sur l’avenir de l’aéroport régional de Sherbrooke. Il nous fournit un survol de la situation actuelle à l’aéroport, de façon à ce que tous les intéressés au sein de la collectivité puissent participer à une évaluation des possibilités à court et moyen terme de cet actif dans le domaine du transport.