**Behind the numbers: why airports matter**

By Daniel-Robert Gooch

Canada’s airports have been one of this country’s great economic and policy success stories.  Before 1990, airports were a blot of red-ink on the federal balance sheet, costing Canadian taxpayers $135 million a year (a quarter of a billion dollars in today’s currency). Today, not only have airports contributed more than $5.6 billion in rent to federal coffers since 1992, and $6.9 billion in taxes annually, they have also invested more than $22 billion in new infrastructure, without costing taxpayers.

The Canadian Airports Council’s (CAC) report on airports’ economic impact sheds new light on the sector’s performance, showing a clear and continuous upward trend in passenger growth, employment, contributions to GDP, economic outputs and more.

The numbers are impressive: in 2016, Canada’s airports handled over 140 million passengers, up an incredible 112 per cent from 1988, directly contributing $48 billion in economic output, $19 billion in GDP, 194,000 jobs and $13 billion in wages.  These are big amounts – almost too big to get your head around. But if you peel off some of the zeros, a very compelling story emerges.

Averaged out, a million passengers move through Canada’s airports roughly every two and a half days. That means that for every 63 hours, airports directly create 1,400 full time jobs, and generate $137 million in GDP and $50 million in taxes.

Here’s another way to look at it: For every 1,000 aircraft take-offs and landings at Canada’s airports, about 30 jobs are required, generating $3 million in GDP and $1 million in taxes for all levels of government. With 140 million movements a year, it adds up quickly.

And that’s only the direct impacts — when indirect and induced data are included, the total impacts jump to $79 billion in economic output, $35 billion in GDP, 355,000 jobs, and $22 billion in wages.

But numbers don’t tell the whole story. By enabling the movement of people and goods to destinations in Canada and around the world, airports have an important role to facilitate economic and social opportunity – sometimes in unexpected ways.

Everyone knows that the Toronto Pearson International Airport is an international hub that connects Canadians to the world. But people may not realize how that connectivity embraces the rest of Canada. For example, flights from and to Toronto-Pearson allows entrepreneurs in Prince Edward Island to reach Asian markets, to promote not only the ever-popular Anne of Green Gables and lucrative high-end tourism, but also the island’s 1000-person strong aerospace sector. Hubbing through Toronto also gives 500 students from India (the fastest growing market in Canada for international students) the opportunity to get a quality education in Canada.

Along the same lines, many people may not know that the Ottawa Macdonald-Cartier International Airport is home base for First Air, facilitating the movement of more than 19.4 million kilos of cargo freight to Canada’s Arctic communities, including food, mail, medical supplies and other critical goods.

Airports’ economic contributions are impressive, but even more impressive is their importance in supporting and enhancing opportunities for all Canadians – and Canadian businesses.

An excellent example is Avigilon Corporation, a Vancouver-based high-tech company with an international clientele. James Henderson, president and chief executive officer, explained the airport’s central role: “We ship a massive amount of product throughout the globe: tens of thousands of units moving in and out every month. And as a company we need to be sure that as we continue to scale (up), that we are close to the resources we need such as the Vancouver International Airport to help support that scale.”

Whether you look at airports’ direct contributions to the economy, or look beyond to their role as an economic catalyst, there is no question that Canada’s airports are an engine that drives jobs, wealth and opportunity for all.  Canada’s airport system should be seen as a source of pride and opportunity for all Canadians. Airports benefit everyone, even those who may never board a plane.