**Working together: How regional airport networks can grow access and opportunity**

Growth is good – it’s something we all strive for. But what is the right strategy when on the horizon, your growth is starting to near your capacity? You bring together a group of airports to find solutions together.

That’s the idea behind the Southern Ontario Airport Network (SOAN), a network of the 11 most commercially significant airports between Kingston and Windsor. Southern Ontario is not only Canada’s most populous region, it’s essential to Canada’s prosperity, accounting for over a third of the economy, almost 40 per cent of exports, and home to several Fortune 500 corporations, 15,000 high-tech companies and 28 universities and colleges.

As the fastest growing region in the county, Southern Ontario will continue to be an engine of Canada’s economy, but it will require long-term, high-quality air access into and out of the region. The growth in demand and diversity of air service needs requires that the region and stakeholders think differently about how to support these needs.

CAC’s president, Daniel-Robert Gooch explained that with international passenger travel expected to reach 7.2 billion annually by 2035 worldwide, many countries are looking to some form of airport network to manage capacity. However, he emphasized that the SOAN is taking its own “made-in-Canada” approach, respecting local communities’ needs and goals, and retaining each airport’s decision-making autonomy.

“The network is not prescriptive in any way” said Chris Wood, general manager of the Region of Waterloo International Airport. “It simply allows everyone to plan on a regional basis, rather than trying to deal with problems in isolation. At the end of the day, the SOAN accommodates the reality that passengers will still want to go where they want to go, and communities will need what they need.”

But there is no doubt that a capacity milestone is looming. “Our forecast tells us that by 2043, aviation demand in this region will be around 110 million passengers,” said Howard Eng, president and chief executive officer of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority. “When we look at the current capacity amongst airports in the region, we could be leaving millions of passengers ‘on the table’ if we don’t take action. Thankfully, we have a network of great airports that have come together to start brainstorming ways to capitalize on this incredible opportunity.”

And it’s these opportunities that keep all the airports engaged and active around the table. The group, which includes Toronto Pearson International Airport, Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport, Hamilton John C. Munro International Airport, Kingston/Norman Rogers Airport, Lake Simcoe Regional Airport, London International Airport, Oshawa Executive Airport, Niagara District Airport, Peterborough Airport, Region of Waterloo International Airport, and Windsor International Airport, has already identified a number of ways that their communities, region and the country could prosper using a regional strategy.

The SOAN will allow member airports to plan on an unprecedented scale and continue to be strong economic facilitators for their local communities -- whether it be tourism in the Niagara region, the high-tech sector in Waterloo or executive air services in Oshawa. The network also provides an opportunity to grow demand and raise awareness of the many airport choices passengers and businesses have to meet their air service needs.

With the region’s airports supporting more of the demand for air services -- from passenger to corporate aviation flights, flight school and training to aircraft maintenance -- resources at Canada’s largest airport could be freed up to support its evolution into North America’s next Mega Hub airport. This would provide the region and country with connectivity, similar to what is being offered by other major international airports around the world including London Heathrow, Dubai and Singapore.

The creation of a Canadian mega hub would be significant for the country, not only securing Canada’s place as a major nexus for global transportation, but as a way to build synergies for international business and trade opportunities. Every airport involved in the SOAN understands the long-term benefit for their own communities.

“The creation of the Southern Ontario Airport Network is an important step in the evolution of airports in our region,” said Mike Seabrook, president and chief executive officer of the Greater London International Airport Authority. “The London International Airport fully supports this initiative and believes it will allow Toronto Pearson to fulfill its destiny as Canada's mega-hub airport while better utilizing the infrastructure of airports like London. Meeting the passenger demands of our market and improving their airport experience are at the root of this initiative."

Outside of Southern Ontario, Canada’s airports cooperate in many ways, but no one is expecting the capacity challenges in the same way as southern Ontario any time soon. But “soon” is a relative word. Considering that we are seeing unprecedented demand growth in virtually every region, it is likely that other Canadian airports may eventually have to take a serious look at the benefits – and necessity – of developing their own regional network.