**For Canada’s Growing Airports, Urban Connectivity**

ByDaniel-Robert Gooch

In 2009, the Canada Line train opened between Vancouver International Airport and downtown Vancouver. For travellers going downtown that day, the experience became much better.  Common elsewhere, rail to the airport was a new idea for Canada.

Environmentally-sustainable, seamless and efficient connections to airports are an obvious idea and for Canada’s airports today, improved ground access for travellers is a top priority.   So how did Canada end up lagging?

Elsewhere in the world, development of airports and the road and transit links that connect them are often coordinated under the same level of municipal or national government.  Until the 1990s, the federal government ran Canada’s airports. As provincial and municipal governments shouldered responsibility for roads and transit, building and maintaining links to these federal assets was seen as a burden. Investing in transit was not a priority, as our communities were designed around automobiles and less congested roads.  As a result, many major Canadian airports were transit dead zones.

Much changed with the transfer of airports to independent, locally-run airport authorities responsible for airport management and planning.   Rather than reporting to Transport Canada, airports became locally accountable, with mandates to operate safe, secure airports, but also to promote regional economic development while improving the experience for travellers.

This transformation was pushed forward by community business leaders who understood that their airport was an economic asset – a critical piece of local transportation infrastructure.

Today’s airport leaders work closely with business and government at all levels.  In addition to improving the experience for travellers, the need for better transportation links between airports and the communities they serve is hastened by worsening congestion on roads.  Improving transit for travellers and airport workers has the added benefit of freeing capacity on roadways for transportation of goods.

Toronto’s UP Express train between Toronto Pearson and downtown Union Station opened in 2015. It is the first step in Toronto Pearson’s ambitious bid to create a multimodal ground transportation hub connected to the airport.  Ultimately, it will bring people to the airport from more of the city, but also improve connectivity with the airport employment zone and Southern Ontario.

Business communities are strong allies of travellers and their airports.  The Canadian Global Cities Council (CGCC) is a coalition of presidents and chief executive officers of Canada’s eight largest urban regional Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade, representing 52 per cent of national GDP and more than half of Canadians.

Canada’s business communities have long understood the importance of having a strong airport.  At a recent event by the Toronto Region Board of Trade, a CGCC member, academic and author Richard Florida discussed research showing that airports help to propel regional economic prosperity, with an even stronger connection to regional growth than the presence of high-tech industry, and similar impact to the presence of high-skill talent.

The CGCC’s platform sees investment in transportation infrastructure as investing in Canada’s strategic assets.  CGCC has called for airport policy reform to align Canada with global best practices, but also for international airports to be factored into transit infrastructure planning by all levels of government.

As the federal government has named transit and transportation/trade as two of five main infrastructure investment priorities, investments in transit links to airports should fit well within the government’s fiscal agenda.

As Canada invests more than $20 billion into transit in coming years, airports are engaged with local leaders to ensure inter-modal connectivity at the airport.  By 2023, Montreal-Trudeau will be connected to downtown Montreal and the region through light-rail, expected to connect to VIA Rail. Federal/provincial funding are confirmed for Ottawa-Macdonald-Cartier Airport’s link in the city’s light rail expansion.  Other airports are working on light rail systems or improved bus connections.  Ten years after the Canada Line opened, even Vancouver Airport Authority’s latest master plan already identifies the need for more ground links also.

Canada’s cities have big ambitions; being a global city means having an airport with great air access, but also strong local transportation links to bring travellers and goods to and from the airport.