**Locally managed and community-based: Dispelling myths about airports**

By: Daniel-Robert Gooch

If you’re like most Canadians, you probably believe that your airport is managed by the federal or provincial government or even a profit-making business.  In fact, a recent poll by Nanos Research showed that only 10 per cent of Canadians know that Canada’s largest airports are operated by local airport authorities – people who work and live in your community.

Airports are community assets – literally.  Not only are they critical parts of Canada’s transportation network – a fact recognized by 98 percent of Canadians – they are also major contributors to local economies, facilitating commerce and directly injecting 194,000 jobs and $48 billion to Canada’s economy annually.

According to Nanos, most Canadians appreciate that airports have value beyond being a place to wait for flights.  But, the poll also reveals that there is room to improve our general understanding of airports, and by extension, enhance the relationship between airports and residents.

Does it matter? I think it does. For example, if you believe that your airport is run by government – a view shared by 51 per cent of Canadians – then you may also believe that it receives tax subsidies.

The truth is that Canadian airports receive no operational subsidies.  Federal  dollars are not used to run airports. In fact, airports are taxpayers themselves, remitting an estimated seven billion dollars to federal, provincial and municipal governments every year.

Beginning in 1992, the federal government decided to turn over airport management to local authorities, based on the idea that airports would be run most effectively by those who have the greatest stake in their success – the people who live and work in the area.

The government made the right call.  In 1990, airports were a red blot on Canada’s balance sheet, costing taxpayers $135 million a year – almost a quarter of a billion in today’s currency. Fast forward to 2018, airport authorities are not only taxpayers, but they are astute and prudent financial managers.  Any profits (excess of revenues over expenses) are reinvested into improving services to the travelling public or reducing rates and charges.  Canadian airports have injected more than $22 billion into capital projects and operational improvements in virtually every region of the country, increasing access, enhancing safety and efficiencies and improving the travel experience.

The fact that airports are important to Canada is not a secret.  The survey confirms that, for the most part, the vast majority of people – about 90 percent — understand that their airports contribute to their local economies.  But, while impressions of airports and their role remain positive, the intensity of positive impressions and impressions of importance have generally decreased over time.

This trend is unfortunate, but I can surmise why it’s happening: the poll also demonstrates that people think their overall travel experience has been getting worse, with concerns including the cost of travelling out of one’s area airport, followed by long wait times at security checkpoints, a lack of flight options, cancelled or delayed flights, long wait times at customs and, finally, aircraft noise. It is conceivable that these impressions could cast a shadow on people’s overall perceptions of airports.

Ironically, airports often have little or no direct control over many of these issues.  But, they have a role in addressing them.  Airports are at the centre of a complex machine with many moving parts and many divergent interests: airlines, security, customs, air traffic control, and of course, passengers.

They are in constant communication with their partners and clients, as well as with community-based groups to work together to attract new services and routes, find efficiencies and cost savings, and, at the same time, ensure that they are responsive and responsible members of the community.

An airport is not located in the centre of town, but it is certainly in the heart of the area’s economic and social well-being.  You may not think of your airport as a community asset in the same way as a hospital, park, library or hockey arena, but, given how much they impact your quality of life, perhaps it’s time to begin.