

Closure of Edmonton City Centre Airport affects north

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The 'gateway to the north' is on the brink of metaphorical tear-down, and those who are affected have had little say as the decision has been centralized in Edmonton.

The Edmonton City Centre Airport (ECCA) (primarily used for Medevac services, charter planes and flight training) is slated for full closure. Members of Envision Edmonton (a group mobilized to protest the closure) visited Peace River last week to urge residents to press the issue as a provincial one, though Peace River MLA Frank Oberle says the Province's powers are limited to those of persuasion.

About 25 people attended Envision Edmonton's presentation at the Legion Thursday night where attendees watched a video created by Envision outlining what the organization sees as issues surrounding the airport.

Edmonton's mayor and council made the decision to close the airport in 2009, and one of the two runways was shut down in Aug. 2010.

Much of the presentation was focused around the emergency medical aspect of the airport. The ECCA is located 1.5 kilometres from the hospital, whereas the Edmonton International Airport is 25 kilometres away. Envision representatives stressed that most northern patients who use the Medivac system are in critical-condition, which puts them in a situation where the time it takes to get to the hospital is of the utmost importance.

The provincial government – under the wing of which Medevac services fall –commissioned a study on implications on the Medevac services becoming based out of the Edmonton International Airport.

Recommendations springing from the study found "the current partial closure of the Edmonton City Centre Airport is already having an effect on the Medevac system." It states that taking Medevac patients to the Edmonton International Airport rather than the ECCA results in a longer journey, which brings increased risk. The main patient safety concern is that an increase in journey time for critically-ill Medevac patients could have a negative effect on their well-being, it stated.

Though Peace River MLA Frank Oberle says he has not yet seen the study, he did not mince his words on the topic in a phone interview with the Record-Gazette.

"I just find this an incredibly stupid decision on the part of Edmonton. Why would we sink another nickel into that hospital if we can't get patients to it anymore?" he said.

"Edmonton is on the verge of being an international medical centre. The opportunities that await them are just phenomenal. And now they want to cut off the only access to their city centre's medical facilities. I can't believe it," he said.

Though despite his distaste, he says that the decision regarding the airport closure is out of provincial hands as it is on land owned by the City, operating under the authority of the City.

"Not sure what powers that (the commissioned study) will give us other than persuasive powers. In the meantime I have talked to the provincial government, the City of Edmonton," he said.

"It's a frustrating argument, but it falls on deaf ears with the City," Oberle said.

Local hospitals simply cannot provide the same level of services as Edmonton for two main reasons: firstly, in rural areas there is simply not the patient base for highly specialized physicians to work; secondly the city is equipped with resources, including a cancer clinic, heart clinic, and children's hospital that lower-population rural areas of the province do not warrant.

A reason for closure of the airport is for the City to use the centrally located land to redevelop, but even this proposition is met with skepticism from both Envision and MLA Oberle.

"They seem to think there's some giant development potential for this land and I'm sure there is. But they haven't yet mentioned to their citizens exactly what the environmental liabilities are which Edmonton will be liable for before they can sell the land," Oberle said.

"That has been an airport since before the war so they've been dumping fuel and oil and the ground for 100 years and you can bet there's a very large environmental liability there."

Mayor Lorne Mann, who attended Envision Edmonton's presentation, emphatically agreed with the closure being a poor decision for the north.

"For us it's a matter of life and death. We're attempting to build medical centres of excellence, but as they pointed out, high-end medicine stays in major urban areas," he said.

Envision urges people to write their MLA's to make it a provincial issue; Oberle encourages people to write the City of Edmonton.

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