

MAINTAINING AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SERVICES

Brief submitted by the Association des Pilotes et des Propriétaires de Hangar de l'Aéroport de Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu (APPH) [Association of pilots and hangar owners of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Airport]

To the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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IS NAV CANADA SHORT-SIGHTED?

NAV CANADA plays a unique and critical role managing the 18 million square kilometres of Canadian civil airspace. Before the pandemic, NAV CANADA services safely guided three million flights every year.

“Since NAV CANADA was founded in 1996, safety has been our top priority.

Air transportation is an essential industry that connects Canada to the world. It plays a vital role in our economy and in our communities from coast to coast to coast. Our critical role within the aviation ecosystem is to help guide aircraft safely and efficiently through our airspace.”

<https://www.navcanada.ca/en/corporate/about-us.aspx>

NAV CANADA has established an enviable global reputation.

To achieve that reputation, NAV CANADA implemented a staff training plan that it took very seriously. Air traffic controllers must undergo two to three years of training, which qualifies them for a specific position. These are very costly assets that demand a great deal of effort from NAV CANADA.

However, more than 100 air traffic controllers recently received lay-off notices. This will have a serious impact on service in four regional control centres in Gander, Moncton, Montreal and Edmonton, and in the control towers in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec City, Windsor, Sault Ste. Marie, Regina, Fort McMurray, Prince George and Whitehorse.

Before the pandemic hit, Canada already had a 13% shortage of air traffic controllers, and the annual bill for overtime was \$100 million.

Among the employees who were laid off were almost all air traffic controllers in training at the Dorval training centre, which is the only place in the country that offers specialized training for air traffic controllers.

When air traffic resumes in a few months, it will be difficult for NAV CANADA to maintain its level of service, and the safety of its operations will be greatly affected.

Reducing its front-line staff is a very short-sighted action that will affect one of Canada’s critical sectors.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the FAA is recruiting controllers in anticipation of the recovery.

https://www.faa.gov/jobs/career_fields/aviation_careers/experienced_controllers/

CLOSURE - SAINT-JEAN CONTROL TOWER (CYJN)

NAV CANADA has already published its intention to terminate air traffic control services in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and issued surplus status letters even before its final report was submitted to Transport Canada.

RISK ANALYSIS

When there are service changes, NAV CANADA consults with stakeholders to clearly establish the risks associated with those changes. Consultation periods generally last more than a year. In the case of the multiple service changes planned for 2021, the analysis period was reduced to a few weeks. We wonder about the seriousness of that analysis.

CONSULTATION

On November 10, 2020, we submitted a feedback document and had to contact NAV CANADA to be invited to the consultation, which took place on November 25.

During the consultation, NAV CANADA's agents stated that the measure was not just financially motivated and that the work would be carried out in a serious manner.

STUDY

An identical study on the Saint-Jean tower was conducted in October 2006 (Hazard Identification and Risk Analysis - HIRA). At the time, the recommendation was to maintain the services.

The conditions supporting the decision to maintain the tower in 2006 have not changed. In addition, the volume and diversity of air traffic have increased.

Since 2006, air traffic has increased from 37,822 to 50,500 movements, and early 2020 predictions indicated a volume of approximately 55,000 movements for the year.

It should be noted that a large proportion of that traffic occurs in the summer, particularly in June, July and August. That period accounts for 48% of annual movements (24,269 in 2019). CYJN is therefore becoming one of Canada's busiest airports.

We are seeing more and more school traffic from surrounding airports (CYHU, CYUL and CSB3), as these airports are becoming saturated, particularly in the summer.

As a result, the airport receives inexperienced pilots who have to handle a variety of aircraft: gliders, helicopters, twin-engine planes, balloons, etc., at an airport that has a choice of three runways. In their case, air traffic control is essential.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

Since the November consultation, NAV CANADA has not contacted us to discuss its assessments.

We find it difficult to conceive that the study's conclusions could be any different than those from 2006.

In fact, how can it be concluded that there is less need for safety and services when the airport's activity has increased?

During the consultation on November 25, the participants were all of the same opinion: without the tower's services, sooner or later, a serious incident will occur at the Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Airport.

It is clear that the tower's closure was motivated solely by financial reasons. Contrary to what its president, Raymond Bohn, stated, the risk assessment work was botched in order to deal with a financial issue in the very short term.

The decision does not take impacts and risks into account.

The financial situation is the main motivator.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We must maintain and protect Canada’s air traffic control services so that we are ready when things return to normal. NAV CANADA seems to want to bow to the pressure and make hasty decisions that will affect the country’s competitiveness in the long term.

In a letter dated February 16 and addressed to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the premiers of the affected provinces unanimously asked that all decisions concerning closures and lay-offs be suspended until COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and air traffic returns to normal.

WE RECOMMEND NOT APPROVING THE CLOSURES AND LAY-OFFS PROPOSED BY NAV CANADA UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Maintaining air traffic control services at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Airport – APPH brief

THE APPH

The Association des Pilotes et des Propriétaires de Hangar de Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu (APPH) was created in 2003 to promote general aviation. The association was founded by enthusiasts and managed solely by volunteers. All of these individuals care deeply about aviation in all its forms.

With its 231 members and still attracting new ones, the APPH is now one of Canada's largest pilot associations and the most active local association.

An interesting fact is that the City of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu mandated the Association des Pilotes to operate airport services (FBO). The APPH conducts daily runway inspections and manages safety incidents, fuelling and ramp services for general aviation customers. This will be the fifth year that the APPH has provided personalized pilot-to-pilot service, which is unique to Quebec.

THE SAINT-JEAN-SUR-RICHELIEU AIRPORT (CYJN)

The Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Airport was built in 1940 at the start of the Second World War as a military training centre for bomber observers. Still today, the airport presents a military colour with the nearby Royal Military College and the Saint-Jean Garrison, and the important activity of the gliders of the Royal Canadian Air Cadets. It should be noted that the Saint-Jean Garrison provides basic military training to more than 5,000 people every year.

For many years, the federal government rented the airport to the city and finally sold it to the municipality in 2004. Since then, the municipality has rehabilitated the infrastructure and revamped safety procedures for its users' enjoyment.

The airport is conveniently located, as it is only 30 minutes south of Montreal by car. It is a certified aerodrome (certificate issued in 1995) that occupies a total area of 1.5 million m².

The unique presence of a control tower, one of six in the province, allows for the delivery of air traffic services (air traffic control, emergency notification and flight information) in English and French. The CYJN tower is renowned for its efficient and friendly service.

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