

What's Going Wrong at Canadian Airports?

Many of us who have been hanging around airports for some time will agree there has been a change in aviation that has not always been beneficial to the public. I tried to think where, and how, these changes have come about, and I came up with the following problems and causes;

-There is a “one-size-fits-all” approach to regulating airports and aviation. This is almost always inefficient, and often ineffective.

-The devolution of airports from Federal Government to the Provinces and some municipalities. This went with funding that is deposited into “General Revenues” and it becomes hard for those managers to leave it targeted towards aviation once they have the ability to assign it to other priorities, and;

-Now, the Provinces and Municipalities find themselves threatened by the Federal level with budget cuts if they fail to meet the “letter of the law” at airport facilities, an expensive level of performance the Feds themselves never met while they owned the authority.

-This devolution has created “MishMash” of rules and rule-makers. Transport Canada are the original champions of convoluted and pseudo-legal Regulations and Policies that even a lawyer has trouble reading. The Provinces and Municipalities add their own rules (building, zoning, development etc). Today no one knows exactly what the rules are, a situation that's not helped when those rules are applied by bureaucrats who make no separation between what is actually law, and what is really just policy. Is it any wonder that approvals for anything are nearly impossible. (lex malla = lex nulla)

-Competing land-use pressures makes long term survivability of airports uncertain. (Every airport would be more valuable to someone as a real-estate development.) And don't forget the “not-in-my-back-yard” component. We commonly hear in the media of people who didn't mind moving into a “deal” condo in a subdivision under the approach for runway 29, but now find the noise unbearable.

-Increasing costs and deteriorating infrastructure are common. Most of the existing aviation infrastructure was built when there was one decision maker in charge (the Federal Government), funding was relatively unlimited (i.e. the 1940's and 50's), and when building costs much lower. Much of the Canadian aviation infrastructure is approaching the end of it's projected life.

-Public perceptions are often false, based on little knowledge or limited experience, and hence their expectations are also unrealistic. This makes it difficult for politicians and managers to make tough decisions.

Most North Americans believe that so long as Air Big Company continues to be available to take us to our winter vacation whenever we want, things must be running

OK? And most believe that air travel must be safe, look at the inconvenience and effort that the regulators make before they let me onto that flight. Few will consider the possibility that costly “Security”, which is now become a priority buzzword across the country, is perhaps at the expense of facility maintenance or aircraft maintenance or both.

-Government perceptions are often wrong. Bureaucrats regularly turn to lawyers to determine the “reality” of perceived problems. Anytime someone, somewhere, sues the Government, they respond to reduce their liability. Their first response is to create more rules. In a bad situation, if someone else can be shown to have failed to live up to the rules given to them, then the Minister is safe. Who will complain? (The politicians won’t!)

-Their second preferred approach is to demand more insurance. The creation of more “deep pockets” redirects lawsuits. There is an argument that more deep pockets frequently provokes more lawsuits, but who’s going to complain? (The lawyers certainly won’t!)

-And, finally with rules so detailed and convoluted that they are nearly impossible to comply with, responsibility will ultimately be found to rest on the insured, who then finds themselves outside the limits of their coverage. (The insured might complain, but the Insurance Companies certainly won’t!)

-Invalid circular arguments distract from actual issues too. An example is that the public demand for Safety is often fueled by Government’s own rhetoric and media sensationalism. The focus then is a need to be seen do do something. More expensive responses and more dramatic responses are often equated with more competent responses. Who is going to complain? (An unknowing public won’t!)

Until you have experienced the hypocrisy of the existing system governing aviation it is hard to imagine how prevalent and entrenched it is. The concern is that we have stepped onto a slippery slope that ends with the lost viability of most of the General Aviation system here. The only solution I can see is to recognize these causes and educate as many people as we can with the situation.

George Balmer

Getting along with your local airport operator.

The pilots I know are a realistic, frugal bunch. Most of us have saved and made sacrifices so we can afford aircraft ownership, and even so, most of us are still willing to pay our way and follow the rules. But in a world of increasing rules, political hypocrisy, and “one-size-fits-all” decision making some frustration is bound to appear, on both sides.

We all know of some injustice, most have encountered one or two close up. But, remember that the Federal Government was failing to live up to their own rules and hemorrhaging money when they turned most of these airports over to “inferior” Governments. Just imagine what it might be like having assumed control of one of them?

So, what can we do to help build trust and cooperation where it might be slightly frayed. Here are some ideas;

-Most of us have legal contracts (leases) with the management. Lets make sure we make our best efforts to comply with those leases. I know now and then I have parked a skidoo trailer overnight on my lease when it might have been prohibited. But some lease holders I know don't even own airplanes anymore. They seem to have found cheap storage for everything from RV's to what appears to be industrial waste. Just a few people mind you, but it only takes one to trigger an over-reaction.

-The rumor is out that the Federal Government believes we need special security passes and “Drivers Licenses”, and, they will likely demand even more liability insurance before I will be allowed access on the 150 feet of alley that leads to my hanger. We all know that is absurd, but I asked a few local managers and discovered they don't want it, don't believe it is needed, but will lose their Federal airport operating funds if they don't demand it.

So, lets make absolutely sure we are not found guilty of any negligent vehicle operation. Stay on the direct route to our parking. Travel slowly. Park on our leases, without blocking traffic. Keep any gates closed and locked once through them.

Pilots are the last people that don't understand the need for this, but it seems the perception is that we are the ones leaving tire burn-marks, unlocked gates, and damage?

-At our airport, by my count, there are seven security people for each maintenance person. Absurd? Yes, but once again the Federal “rules”, backed by public perception, are that this solves a problem. We know it doesn't solve hi-jacking concerns, and we pilots also know those security people are not doing security patrols of the rest of the airport property.

So, lets do what we can to provide a secure environment for both our investments and our brother aviators and passengers. Minimize the risk by locking things up and removing attractive things from view. Challenge people who seem to behave in suspicious ways. Report anything that may pose a risk to yourself or other pilots and aircraft.

-And while I am on to “security”, lets tie our planes down, properly. You might be willing to lose your \$15,000 Pacer that you have not flown for two years, but can you also afford the Piper Saratoga you land on?

A couple of years ago myself and another COPA member were inspired and bought \$150.00 worth of 1/2 inch rope. Then, one night, we went down the flight line here, cutting off pieces of the rope and tying down unsecured aircraft. We untied no one, we just put a second rope on some, the first on a few, and in many cases tied down the tail when it hadn't been done. (If you don't tie your tail down now, do a little geometry exercise; measure the horizontal distance from your wing tie down points to your main wheels. This is one arm of your fulcrum, it is commonly 6 inches. Now measure the horizontal distance from your main wheels to your third wheel. This is the other arm, commonly over 12 feet in a tail dragger. Imagine your airplane with only the main tie downs in use during a 60 mph wind gust. An “UP” force on the tail could easily be 100 pounds. 100, times 12 feet, with the fulcrum at 1/2 foot. This places what “DOWN” force on your wings? Staggering isn't it?) In any event we never heard a word, I think in most cases no one even noticed.

-Make the effort to keep honest and open communication between us and airport managers.

-When we complain, lets make sure we have gone to the trouble to research and document our complaints, and specify what we need for a satisfactory solution. There was once an old manager who had a sign on his door that said; “**Don't enter until you KNOW what you need.....and don't leave until I know.**” That manger had it figured out. I know in past I may have complained of some issue I felt needing action, but I also didn't suggest my suitable solution, leaving the official who may have been able to help, with a 50/50 chance of making me happy at best. Do this a couple of times and even the most cooperative airport manager may feel they are walking on eggs.

-And in the world of aviation rumors are common. It seems I hear several versions of every issue before

Snowmobiles, motorcycles, ATV's,

We know our side, so imagine for a second that you are the operator of your local airport. What concerns might you expect to find?

Liability

real or perceived it motivates everyone. Law suits are more common, more often legal advice is sought in every decision. The decision to create new rules, allow less activity, and to demand more insurance of those who transit your airport might be seen as solutions to possible problems, and to reduce your legal risks.

Rising Costs / limited budgets

wear and tear on infrastructure (in most cases inherited from the Federal Government) is continuing, or accelerating.

the cost of operation increases and already daily operations leaves little for major repairs.

recapitalization of failing infrastructure has become so expensive it cannot be achieved without special, outside sources of funding. Often this funding is linked to conditions that are difficult to achieve.

Security

real or perceived one of the demands from politicians is to reassure the public aviation is safe. So, "Security" becomes the buzz-word for justifications of most projects, and visibility of that security is advantageous. You can spend the money on gates, fences, patrols, that may not be seen, or you can put it into people in showy uniforms, and force everyone to interact with them, the choice is yours. Either way the chances of a real security incident happening are remote enough you are not likely to be called on to justify your actions.

Government demands

More rules can never be a bad choice. Even if they don't work to reduce the actual risks facing passengers or staff, their mere existence are a layer of liability insulation between your rear end and fault in any incident. The more rules the thicker the insulation. And, from a cynical perspective, the less likely your inferiors will be able to comply with all of them, thereby increasing their portion of any blame.

More and better standards are another type of rules. In most cases the Federal Government who turned the airport over to you could see into the future and realized they couldn't afford to operate and achieve their own regulated standards, so they gave your boss some money and the responsibility. Its too bad you couldn't give the airport back, and watch them fail to meet their own expensive standards, but you have turned the money into "General Revenue" and now it is needed for schools.

Pressure for competing land use

Almost every business person you know has a better use for the airport property. Even the most optimistic economic projection pales when compared to that of a developer who sees centrally located condominiums packed into the hundreds of "unused" acres.

And, many perceptive businessmen have already recognized the availability, relatively cheap rents, and lower scrutiny here, all they need to do is put up with some noise.