



NEWS LOCAL

Shell lands in Josephburg

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The Josephburg airport will never be the same after this week.

That's because the airfield - formally known as the Strathcona Airport - began accepting its first-ever scheduled flights on its tarmac on Monday by Shell's 31-seat corporate plane as it dropped off commuters heading to the company's Scotford plant.

Shell will run daily service in the morning from Calgary to Josephburg and then onto Fort McMurray. A return flight from Fort McMurray will touch down in Josephburg in the late afternoon before the plane flies back to Calgary.

Shell Scotford's manager of communications Randy Provencal said the plan to bring the flight to Josephburg has been in the works for the past two years.

"The discussions on this go back about two years. We are certainly excited to be at this point today and landing our plane at the Strathcona Airport," he said.

While many would speculate that the recent discussions on possible closure of Edmonton's downtown airport had influenced this decision, Provencal immediately dismissed the idea.

"As far as the discussion around the future of the city centre airport, that has been going around for years and really didn't play into this decision at all," he added.

"The primary reasons for us changing our landings to Josephburg was really for the convenience for our travellers and to reduce the safety risk of them driving on the local roads. And safety was a huge component for us in doing this.

"Previously, our employees and contractors from Calgary heading to Scotford were travelling about 45 minutes or more from the city centre airport."

With those commuters now just a five-minute ride down the road, Provencal explained Shell feels it's good for the company and employees because less time is spent getting to their destination and fewer vehicles are out on the road as well, since up to 15 people each day come to the Scotford plant for various business.

Meanwhile, Strathcona's gain is a loss for the Edmonton City Centre Airport - something a lobby group hoping to keep that facility open didn't need to see at this time.

Dave MacLean, vice-president of the Alberta Enterprise Group (AEG), explained that losing a major business client like Shell from the downtown airport is unfortunate.

"We support and promote an active aviation industry at the city centre airport. But to us it was really a no-brainer for Shell to move their flight operations out to Josephburg - for reasons of safety and logistics given the size their operations," MacLean stated.

"So, in a sense, AEG isn't really reading a lot into this situation or putting forward an argument that this move (to Josephburg airport by Shell) is a sign of things to come or is a problem with Edmonton's city centre airport."

Although, MacLean added this circumstance is a glimpse into the future.

"You can't argue with the fact that a company like Shell operating a facility at the city centre airport was good for Edmonton, for the economy and created jobs," he said.

"In the future, if Edmonton city council makes what we consider a foolish move to close that airport, we are going to see a lot of companies do the exact same thing."

Shell and Strathcona County jointly paid for the needed airport improvements to allow the plane to land at the facility.

That included making the runway longer, adding new and improved runway lighting plus installing a new instrument approach and automated weather observation system.

Besides the airport, Strathcona County also received upgrades at its Heartland Fire Hall - the primary response station for the airport. Staffing levels will now be increased from five to six personnel for each shift, while the hall has been updated with aircraft rescue and firefighting equipment.

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