

“It’s the economy, stupid”

Chris Cooke - March 2026

What do a 92-year-old retiree, a gift shop owner, an accountant, a retired real estate agent and a traffic ticket fixer have in common?

They all have basic intelligence but lack the entrepreneurial drive needed to make Chris Hadfield Airport the success it could be.

And after six years, two consultant’s reports and legal fees topping \$200,000 we are back to where we started with a proposed three-person committee made up of church minister Adam Kilner, gift shop owner Chrissy McRoberts and accountant Terry Burrell spending the next three months debating the debated.

They, along with Bill Dennis, George Vandenberg and Dave Boushy have one thing in common when it comes to Sarnia’s municipal airport.

A severe case of cold feet.

Last year, Sarnia city council supported a recommendation from Explorer Solutions, an airport consultant suggesting the formation of a municipal services corporation with a board and manager.

The price tag would top a million dollars.

That was then and this is now.

Burrell led the discussion after realizing, nine months into the debate, that talk is cheap but money is expensive. Suddenly, he and his three-member committee will spend the next three months, at least until June, supposedly debating cheaper ways to, as Anne Marie Gillis puts it, “not to spend money to make money.”

McRoberts has touted the success of St. Thomas, a thriving maintenance hub for Porter and other international airlines run by an airport manager connected to a supportive mayor, municipal clerk and a business-minded city council.

The key here is business-minded, which over the years Sarnia has been lacking.

Apparently, Burrell, McRoberts and possibly Kilner believe Sarnia can do what St. Thomas has done without spending money.

It can’t.

St. Thomas has spent two and a half decades, if not more, developing itself into a maintenance hub without commercial air service that can weather the financial turbulence of economic downturns and most recently the pandemic.

And it has spent money to make money and continues to spend money to make more money.

It knows what it is and what it wants to be with huge hangars, millions invested in runway and facility improvements to attract more of the same.

Unlike Sarnia, St. Thomas recognizes the value of an airport it owns in a neighbouring municipality from which it doesn’t collect any tax dollars.

That’s right, it spends money on an airport it owns, not in St. Thomas but Central Elgin.

Central Elgin gets the tax dollars while St. Thomas gets the floor space and hangar rentals.

Speak to the manager at St. Thomas municipal airport in Central Elgin and he will tell Burrell, McRoberts, Kilner, Dennis, Vandenberg and Boushy what he knows.

And what he knows is that Sarnia’s Chris Hadfield Airport is an opportunity waiting to happen but it won’t happen without commitment, money and a long-term strategy for success.

St. Thomas has an Amazon warehouse.

St. Thomas is getting a Volkswagen battery plant and a Norwegian company is building a \$3.2 billion synthetic graphite production facility.

And let me suggest here that somewhere buried in all that economic success is a dual-runway airport owned by a city and hosted by an adjacent municipality.

In Sarnia the smart money says it time for fewer committees, much less discussion and more action.

With all due respect we don’t need a church minister, a gift shop owner and an accountant pondering the future of our airport.

It is time to pack up the rhetoric and get on with business.

I saw political strategist James Carville while vacationing on Florida’s Sanibel Island recently. Carville, a Democrat who worked in the government of Bill Clinton is known for the catchphrase “it’s the economy, stupid”.

That pretty much sums it up for Burrell and his hapless airport committee.

It is a time waster, is unnecessary and is potentially detrimental to Sarnia’s economy.

What has plagued Sarnia in the past is rearing its ugly head again.

We can’t seem to get out of our own way.

I could be wrong about this but I’m usually not.