

# Let's make Sarnia great again

*Margaret Bird - March 2025*

Sarnia City Council voted yes to invest and to keep the Sarnia Chris Hadfield Airport open for business. That was the easy part, at the Feb. 10 council meeting, and only required arm raising. Now, the real work starts.

Sarnia's geographical location with connectivity to other cities and provinces – by water, rail, roads, and air – all without living in the middle of a busy metropolis – was fantastic. Forty-five years ago, the petro-chemical industry created a demand for businesses and all modes of transportation. Airports are a huge part of the total transportation infrastructure, and an essential component for our economic growth. We had it all, but it slipped away, along with the trains and planes.

We must now show that our airport is open for business. Be competitive for large capital projects, encourage tourism, population growth, and new business development which creates better employment opportunities. Say yes to invest and build more hangars at the airport now.

Municipal airports can operate at city, county, or regional level, serving various purposes, including general and corporate aviation, flight training, and recreational flying. Lambton County and beyond, is affected by our airport's decisions. This point alone calls for possible partnerships, including First Nations who have already asked about the possibility for their potential capital aviation projects. Partnerships will benefit everyone.

Much emphasis is put on the \$400,000 annual airport subsidy that we are paying out, but we should also promote the airport's many current revenue-generating streams, for example: hangar leases & property taxes; fuel sales (for two types of jets and other planes); building leases; fees from Enbridge Gas for underground storage; landing fees for incoming aircraft; parking fees for incoming aircraft during inclement weather; provincial Orng helicopters landing and services; Huron Aviation sightseeing flights, and flight school for new pilots; registered immigration services for our border city; jet flights for incoming and outgoing organ donations; ground rent, and fees for all the 50 or so private planes/pilots; OPP, Royal Canadian Air Force, and Canadian Coast Guard also need the facility's refuelling capabilities to support their overland and overwater (search & rescue) missions; and there's also rent from farmers who farm part of the airport lands. There are more examples but this will give you some idea.

Much of an airport's work is from the air above us, so most of what they do goes unnoticed. But there's a large amount of services that every resident should acquaint themselves with.

All municipal airports are full of beckoning opportunities, and all those that I've checked are moving forward. They may all have different backgrounds and industries, but they're all moving forward and progressing so positively. Some airports sell shares in their lands, as in southwest Ontario's Sexsmith Airport. Others combine operations, as with Kitchener & Waterloo, to create the necessary driving force behind their needs and they are one of the fastest-growing airports, and others have city-operated facilities, as with Windsor which has at least five airlines flying in and out of there, including Air Canada, Porter Airlines, and West Jet. And, St. Thomas Municipal Airport, which is one of the finest municipally-operated facilities in Ontario and has seen incredible recent advancement in all their operations. So, investing in infrastructure does pay off.

There are many exciting ideas in addition to bringing back airline passenger services, for example, air-cargo services which would need huge hangars for storage and shipping; airpark homes, which are gaining much popularity, around the periphery of the airport; hotels, restaurants, retail outlets, duty free; bus and train services to and from the airport – invaluable connectivity for travellers; maintenance businesses, and an airport museum to save & promote our local famous people and history honouring, most recently, Colonel Chris Hadfield -- a channel for transforming children's wonder into a myriad of possible future lifestyles and careers. The list is endless!

We should also advertise and promote our sightseeing flights, all year round, for tourism and for residents. Flying at about 1,200 feet, in all seasons, over our twin bridges, lake, rivers, forest and beaches gives the perfect bird's eye view of everything this wonderful area has to offer.

By staying strongly open for business, our taxes increase, assets and businesses prosper, the population, home-building industry and tourism grows all year round; educational partnerships with Western Research Park & Lambton College occur, and job-creation would grow even more.

As the years have gone by, our original airport lease stopped working in favour of the city. This must now change.

Necessary actions needed, are: A survey of local airports to see how they've achieved their great results; request a current audit of all outgoing monies and incoming revenues by a chartered accountant; end the current annual \$400,000 to the airport; send out requests for information and requests for proposals regarding a city airport operator position, and prospective airlines for passenger services; vote for

a new airport working model (most important); establish a permanent (public & unbiased) board of directors (suggest six – aviation specialist, business leader, lawyer, planner, and an engineer); hire a new and much needed enthusiastic director of operations with a must have aeronautical background who promotes the city – the right person could then transition into a permanent city staff position and all profits would then come into the city.

If the mayor and council endorse the much-needed changes, this could make our city the most successful role model of the future.