

5 airports up for sale

Comox Airport to be among the 101 across nation to go on the block as cost cut measure

By **RENNIE MacKENZIE**

Thomson News Service
OTTAWA -- Five Vancouver Island airports have been put up for sale by Federal Transport Minister Doug Young.

The community airports at Comox, Campbell River, Nanaimo, Port Hardy and Tofino are among 101 small and regional airports across the country that were put on the block in a dramatic bid by Young to pare millions of dollars from the cost of running his expensive department.

Young hasn't posted price-tags on any of the properties, but he has served notice that federal funds, essential to the operation of many, will be cut off to Tofino by the end of March 1997 and to the others by perhaps 2000.

Young wants to sell Tofino to "local interests" within two years. After expenses, the Tofino airfield yielded a \$400 profit in 1992.

But the other four are regional airports with scheduled air services and they will be offered first to the provincial and local governments and then to airport commissions, private businesses or other interests.

In Nanaimo's case, it's possible the city may take it over. It has been operating the airport without financial assistance from Transport Canada.

In 1992 the two scheduled air carriers that use the airport transported more than 91,000 passengers.

The other three have posted deficits.

The heaviest loss was at Campbell River. Operated by

partment is responsible for most of the airport operations. Transport Canada operates only the air terminal.

An undisclosed number of Transport Canada and other federal employees are included in the sale of the airports. Young expects they will end up on the payroll of whoever purchases the airports.

They are among 7,500 air transport employees who will be shaved from the federal payroll with the divestiture of airports across the country.

Young said that, in some cases, it will be up to the smaller municipalities to determine the future of their local airport and if it is financially viable.

He said that some communities may realize savings by having their municipal workers clear snow and provide fire fighting services at the airport.

"Some will have to be very

creative and innovative," he conceded.

But at the same time, it appears Transport Canada will be more helpful with the new proprietors of regional airports than it will with those who take over the smaller fields such as Tofino.

Those who buy the 71 regional airports such as Nanaimo, Campbell River, Comox and Port Hardy, can expect operating subsidies for up to five years, perhaps longer. And assistance will be provided for many capital projects at those airports.

Transport Canada will be keeping only 26 of the 150 certified airports it owns, operates or subsidizes. The remaining airports will form a network that will be known as the national airports system.

The 26 major airports handle 94 per cent of all air travellers.

B.C. irked by consultation lack

The provincial government is alarmed but not surprised by the lack of consultation on federal plans to sell B.C. airports, Transportation Minister Jackie Pement said Thursday in a press release.

"We recognize the need to develop economically viable transportation systems, but profitability alone cannot be the sole determining factor," said Pement. "If Transport Canada concentrates its resources only on profitable airports, safety and service could deteriorate in regional and small airports."

"The provincial government is prepared to co-operate toward making the national transportation network more cost- and operationally-effective, but only in the context of planning and in-depth consultation," said Pement.

"This latest announcement is an indication of how the federal government plans to do business -- downloading costs onto the provinces and ignoring their responsibility to make the transportation network of Canada work

Local officials pleased by airport selling news

The federal government's initiative to commercialize Canada's airports is good news for the two local ones, officials say.

"This is really good news for us," Comox Mayor Alicia Burns said.

Comox's proposal to expand the civilian terminal at CFB Comox has been set up under exactly the sort of locally accountable airport authority called for under the national air transportation strategy, announced Wednesday, Burns said.

"We're already in line with what they're proposing," she said.

The announcement also means Comox Council can get on with negotiating capital funding for the proposed expansion of the civilian terminal, she said.

Although the federal gov-

ernment is looking at restricting capital funding, Burns said she's still optimistic enough money will be available for expanding the taxi-ways, apron and civilian terminal at the base.

"These things are still up for negotiation," she said.

Money for the terminal expansion, in particular, may become available when the federal government realizes how many jobs could be created by the construction project, she said.

Dave Mellin, a director of the Courtenay Airpark Association, said he was also happy with the government's announcement.

The idea of making airports more accountable to their communities is a good one, he said.

The airpark paving project shouldn't suffer from the federal government's budget-chopping reduction in capital grants, he said.

The community programs, which the association has applied to for funding to finish the paving, are still intact, he said.

The association's initiatives should also make the project more attractive for federal funding, he said.

"We're not sitting on our fingers waiting for the federal government to come up with the big bucks," he said.

The airpark should be able to continue operating on its own revenues once the paving project is complete, he said.

The paving is expected to increase the airpark's revenues. That's money the association is going to need to pay off the \$50,000 debt incurred by starting the paving project with financial assistance from only the City of Courtenay.