

Air Labrador cutting flights to coastal towns

Review will likely spell end of service to such places as Cartwright, Port Hope Simpson

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Fewer passengers and the impending completion of the TransLabrador Highway has prompted Air Labrador to review flights to coastal towns, such as Cartwright and Port Hope Simpson.

"We will be announcing shortly what our plans are, but it's most likely that we will vacate that part of our network," said Phillip Earle, Air Labrador's vice-president and chief operating officer.

He expects to make a decision before mid-September.

Earle said the region's sparse population and competition from the Trans-Labrador Highway are making it difficult to continue flights.

"All indications are it will be completed by mid-December, and essentially the dynamics of travel in southern Labrador will immensely at that time," he said.

"The effect of this was felt five years ago. But, as a business, we do have a social conscience, we continued to operate there.

"What we've noticed is as the roads become more dependable, as more people acquire vehicles as a result of the highway ... that's impacted our business."

In 2001, Earle said, the airline flew 19,000 passengers to and from coastal southern Labrador. Last year, it flew 5,000 passengers. "We made an honest effort to operate the service," said Earle. "We are a business, and as a result of people opting to drive, we've seen our traffic volumes go to the point where we're no longer able to make a business case for the level of service that we're providing."

Return flights leave Happy Valley Goose Bay and stop at coastal communities — Cartwright, Black Tickle, Charlottetown, Port Hope Simpson, Williams Harbour and Fox Harbour — before heading to St. Anthony.

Air Labrador flies that route three days a week, using a twin-otter aircraft that seats 18 passengers.

Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones said the provincial government has been aware of Air Labrador's business concerns since April — but has done little to find alternatives for area residents.

"Everyone on the coast of Labrador will be affected by this decision," Jones said in a news release.

"Whether it is scheduled medical appointments or the delivery of mail, air transportation is heavily relied upon in our region.

— Telegram file photo



Following an ongoing review by Air Labrador into the feasibility of continuing service to some coastal Labrador towns, the company expects the service to be eliminated. The review is expected to be complete next month.

“ With the poor road conditions and the lack of infrastructure connecting several communities, action will be needed to address this major gap in service.”

Jones is also the MHA for the Cartwright-L'Anse au Clair district.

She is looking for assurances from the government that these communities will have access to affordable, reliable and effective transportation.

Among the options she said the province should consider are creating a chartered medical service, which is already in place for residents of northern Labrador, and/or building a regional airport in Port Hope Simpson.

“It is time for government to recognize that the transportation system in southern Labrador is in need of significant investment so that communities, and our entire region, are not cut off from the rest of the world,” said Jones.