

Petition tabled by Ms. Frieda Martselos on February 25, 2021

Response by the Honourable Diane Archie, Minister of Infrastructure

Returning Fort Smith Regional Airport Runway to Former Specifications

The Department of Infrastructure is committed to developing and maintaining public infrastructure that is both safe and sustainable, and that meets regulatory requirements and the needs of communities.

Transport Canada's TP312 *Aerodrome Standards and Recommended Practices* identifies the runway requirements for airports in Canada. The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) uses this standard to plan, design, and construct our airport infrastructure to meet current and future needs, while positioning the Government to effectively and economically maintain its assets.

When the Fort Smith Airport runway was built in 1957, runways were commonly 60 metres (m) wide because it was expected that aircraft would be bigger in the future and would need wider runways. However, the evolution of aircraft technology has disproved this projection.

While seeking federal funding to upgrade the Fort Smith Airport's obsolete airfield lighting in 2018, it was identified that the runway's 60m width exceeded operational and regulatory requirements, and that the needs of the community, including the since-established flight school, could be safely met with a 30m-wide runway.

The Fort Smith Airport is a safe airport, and the reduction of the runway width has not affected the level of service. The types of aircraft that primarily and routinely serve the Airport need only a 23m-wide runway. A 30m-wide runway will accommodate larger aircraft than currently using the Fort Smith Airport, such as the Boeing 737 or Airbus A320. Similarly, many flight schools in Canada operate on runways 30m or less in width, and most runways that pilots will encounter in the north are 30m or narrower.

Response to Petition Réponse à la Pétition

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Prior to undertaking the proposed changes, the Department of Infrastructure sought feedback from the industry stakeholders that could be affected by regulatory considerations: those that provide services to the community, represent the northern aviation industry, and may participate in emergency response efforts.

These organizations included Transport Canada, the Department of National Defence, Northwestern Air Lease, Northern Aviation Transportation Association, WestJet and First Air (Canadian North). A response was provided by the Department to the comments and concerns raised during this process.

While the decision to alter the Fort Smith runway is based on regulatory and industry standards that would not ordinarily be the subject of community engagement, it is understood that airport maintenance and improvements are especially important in Northwest Territories communities like Fort Smith, where residents and industry depend on safe, secure, accessible and reliable air travel. The Department will continue to work with the community to ensure its residents fully understand the benefits of the upgrades.

The Minister of Infrastructure recently traveled to Fort Smith to meet with local governments and organizations to discuss the matter and hear their concerns. The common theme was unease that the reduced width of the runway could jeopardize safety of the community should an evacuation be necessary. However, the Department assured those concerned that safety has not been compromised, and a commitment was made to meet with the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs to confirm that Fort Smith's emergency plan is up to date.

Returning the runway to a width of 60m would require significant investment to construct, the added expense to relocate the upgraded airfield lighting system, and increase the cost of future maintenance. The current specifications of the runway do not impede the safe landing or departure of the aircraft using the Fort Smith Airport, nor do they impede regional economic development and growth. The expenditure of public funds to return the runway to its former width specifications is unnecessary, and the Department of Infrastructure has no plans to do so.