

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Town of Gander Urges Government to Reconsider Ambulatory “Centralization”: Calls for Inclusion of Gander International Airport in Re-imagined Air Ambulance Service

Gander, NL – April 24, 2024 - The Town of Gander is taking a decisive stand against the provincial government's plan to centralize air ambulance services, urging a pause in the Request for Proposal (RFP) process to allow for more extensive consultation with key stakeholders, and to engage a thorough review of the criteria that led to the decision.

In November 2020, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador established Health Accord NL, a task force mandated to re-imagine the health care system across the province. After extensive evaluation, Health Accord NL recommended the creation of a comprehensive, integrated air and ground ambulance system - encompassing ground ambulance, non-medical transports, fixed-wing medivac, and helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS); complete with a centralized Medical Communications Centre (MCC) based in St. John's.

The proposed changes would see the consolidation of air ambulance services, with a focus on fixed-wing aircraft based in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and St. John's. However, the Town of Gander contends that any reimagined system must consider the unique geographical challenges of the province and the need for efficient transportation infrastructure.

The Town of Gander emphasizes that decisions about centralized services should prioritize the ability to serve the needs of the population and demographics effectively. The Town of Gander also highlights critical considerations that the current proposal may overlook. The reimagined health care system must account for current and future demographics, utilize existing infrastructure efficiently, and effectively interconnect provincial health care facilities through transportation networks.

Gander International Airport, strategically located and home to the Air Services Division of Transportation and Infrastructure, presents a compelling case for integration into the proposed health care delivery model. The Town of Gander proposes that the Gander International Airport be recognized as a logical hub for visiting/travelling clinics, facilitating a two-way connection of patients and health professionals. Placing exclusive emphasis on St. John's compromises overall system sustainability and does not align with the provincial designation of Gander as the Aerospace Center of Excellence.

The Town of Gander asserts that the proposed centralization undermines the commitment to supporting rural communities and maintains that the Air Services Division, headquartered in Gander, should play a pivotal role in the proposed plan. The current plan neglects the expertise and infrastructure already in place in Gander, which includes the headquarters of the Air Services Division providing centralized aircraft maintenance, dispatch, and hangar infrastructure.

Further, the Town points out that Gander airport's role as the base for provincial water bomber operations, federal search and rescue, proximity to a regional hospital, and pilot / aircraft navigation training all point to its undeniable capacity to host air ambulance assets. ^[OOB]

Quotes:

Percy Farwell, Mayor, Town of Gander:

"The stubborn determination of government to proceed with a process that appears specifically designed to achieve a predetermined outcome of a lucrative public procurement process should be of concern to anyone who pays taxes in this province and, most importantly, anyone who may require air ambulance service going forward. Unable to produce any valid rationale for insistence on basing air ambulance aircraft in St. John's that would pass the test of objective assessment, while ignoring any role for Gander airport in such a service, government is noticeably clear in its acceptance of a mindset that anything worth doing in this province is best done in St. John's. Lack of transparency in this regard also suggests the potential of commitment to specific private sector companies who would benefit from such a process.

Notwithstanding obvious operational considerations that impact response time and reliability of this important health service, Minister Osborne appears content to proceed with a government action that will represent an existential economic threat to the aviation and aerospace sector in Gander that is at the very core of its existence and has earned it the designation of the province's Aerospace and Defense Centre of Excellence. Sadly, while the government has frequently proclaimed this status and professed to support it, its actions as a sector stakeholder signals, at best, the lack of understanding required to sustain it and would, in fact, contribute to its demise.

All of rural Newfoundland and Labrador should be tired of the St. John's- centric mentality that prevails at the senior levels of government and should expect better. The decision to indefensibly centralize air ambulance services in St. John's underscores an even more serious and broad threat posed to rural NL, undermines government's often verbalized commitment to supporting rural communities, and hinders the growth and stability of Gander as a center of excellence. We are asking for a pause in the RFP process to ensure a thorough examination of all factors involved."

The Town of Gander remains committed to contributing constructively to the ongoing dialogue and looks forward to the opportunity for collaborative decision-making that benefits all residents of Newfoundland and Labrador.