

The Greater Moncton Roméo LeBlanc International Airport is the quiet giant of economic pillars in our region.

The airport quietly goes about its business, moving passengers and cargo to points near and far. It occasionally toots its own horn, but usually flies under the radar – pardon the pun. Considering its footprint on our community, and its importance to our economic progress, we should not take it for granted.

While our airport has enjoyed some tremendous success and growth in the past 20 years, competition for passengers and cargo is fierce. That's why last week's federal announcement of the \$2.1 billion National Trade Corridors Fund is significant both for what it offers – and what it doesn't – for the Greater Moncton airport.

An economic impact study released early in 2016 showed the impact of our airport. The study found that in 2014, a total of \$665 million in economic activity was generated by the airport, an increase of more than 75 per cent from the previous study in 2008. Airport operations supported 2,798 local jobs and the facility paid \$37 million in taxes to the three levels of government.

In 2016, the airport moved 25,000 tonnes of freight and 657,000 passengers – more than the Fredericton and Saint John airports combined.

That amount of economic activity makes the GMIA one of the top 10 private sector economic contributors in New Brunswick.

That's why the Greater Moncton Chamber of Commerce decided this year to make the airport one of its advocacy priorities. That means the success of the airport and the role it plays in helping Greater Moncton prosper will never fly below our radar. Which brings us to that new federal funding.

The \$2.1 billion NTCF fund is spread over 11 years and is part of the \$10.1 billion planned for trade and transportation infrastructure in the Trudeau government's 2017-2018 budget.

The good news is that the Moncton airport as one of the 26 airports that make up the National Airport System will be eligible to apply for 'merit-based' funding under the NTCF program. Moncton could use that money to enhance cargo handling capabilities, improve accessibility or perhaps do some runway work.

But the funding is spread over 11 years, we will be competing on merit against the rest of the country and the competition will be intense.

The bad news for our airport in last week's announcement concerns a special provision in which small National Airport System airports can receive funding for safety improvement projects. Small airports are deemed those which have fewer than 600,000 passengers annually. That means the Fredericton, Saint John and Charlottetown airports will have access to additional money to improve their facilities.

A resolution was passed at the 2016 annual general meeting of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce to lobby for special funding for the six 'small' airports across the country that needed help with safety projects. The Greater Moncton Chamber supported that resolution because these airports do need help.

However, there are only two smaller airports in the country who have annual passenger counts between 600,000 and one million – Thunder Bay, Ontario and the Greater Moncton Roméo LeBlanc International Airport.

What this change in funding criteria means is that airports in the province and region which compete for business with Greater Moncton's facility could now receive additional money from Ottawa. For instance, if Fredericton or Saint John need a new airport fire truck, the approximate \$1 million cost may be covered by the new program, while Greater Moncton pays its own way.

We are a victim of our own foresight, planning and success. Our airport has grown due to good board and operational management, a solid strategy, our location, and key investments. The arbitrary 600,000 passenger cut-off for small NAS airports creates an uneven playing field. It puts Greater Moncton at a competitive disadvantage for funding with its regional rivals.

The GMCC believes the federal government should change the passenger level criteria from 600,000 to one million passengers annually so that both Greater Moncton and Thunder Bay can qualify for the new safety-related funding.

We are already the leading airport in the province. Federal funding programs should recognize the strength and – most importantly – the potential of the Greater Moncton Airport and ensure it has equal access to the funding it needs to continue to be a key economic catalyst for all of New Brunswick.

- *Carol O'Reilly is CEO of the Greater Moncton Chamber of Commerce. Her column, Chamber Voice, appears the third Saturday of each month.*