

THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

TANYA LAING MOORE PHOTOS



NEW HORIZONS: Mayors Ross Priest and Jim Ogilvie have set their sights and expectations high for the possibilities that the almost completed improvements at the Canadian Rockies International Airport will bring to the region.

Ready for takeoff

With the much-anticipated completion of the Canadian Rockies International Airport runway extension and new arrivals section, the East Kootenay region is ready to welcome the world.

by TANYA LAING MOORE

The expansion of the Canadian Rockies International Airport, which lies between the cities of Cranbrook and Kimberley, took a long time to get off the ground, according to mayors Ross Priest of Cranbrook and Jim Ogilvie of Kimberley.

"Too long," said Priest.

However, the first phase of the expansion—the sunlit arrivals area—is complete and the final two phases of the terminal—including the departures area, expanded security services and restaurant—will be ready for use by summer of 2008. It will be a culmination of a joint effort between the cities of Cranbrook and Kimberley, the Ktunaxa Nation Council and the provincial government, but it is ultimately a home-grown project.

"It really gained momentum 10 years ago," said Ogilvie. "It started out with studies from the Province—trying to get everyone comfortable with the idea. But it wasn't easy to sell to the government because of where we were located."

"It was a real challenge getting them to be aware of the opportunity," agreed Priest.

Ogilvie said the provincial government was wary of the project at first and wasn't convinced the airport expansion was de-

"The opportunity is tremendous; it's bigger than anyone even imagined"

—Jim Ogilvie, mayor of Kimberley

sirable for the people of the East Kootenay.

"The minister at the time said, 'You haven't got the support of everyone in the region,'" said Ogilvie.

However, when the residents of the region were polled, along with business owners and developers, the support for the project was overwhelming.

"That was the turning point," said Ogilvie.

The ideas have taken wing and even before the completion of the terminal expansion, the runway extension or the soon-to-be-introduced international carriers, the region has benefited from the uplifting promise of the improvements. Ogilvie said that the community of Kimberley is already seeing an influx of developers as well as new residents who cite the airport expansion as one of the reasons for the move.

"Several major projects are going ahead based on the airport expanding," said Ogilvie. "We're in the recreation business—both summer and winter—and we want to build four-season tourism. And it is working." ▶



WELCOME IMPROVEMENTS: (From L to R) The main terminal building will include cedar siding and floor-to-ceiling glass; mayors Ogilvie and Priest are ready to welcome visitors to the region; the inviting arrivals area provides views of awesome scenery.

► Priest noted that Kimberley is seeing significant gain in its growing tourism status, especially as instant access to recreational opportunities is becoming more readily available. Kimberley was recently named one of the 13 tourism communities in B.C., a designation that will elevate the city's profile and tourism potential. And that potential extends far beyond Canada's borders.

"We know we can bring people here to ski from England and Germany cheaper than it would be for them to travel to the Alps," said Ogilvie.

The airport will give Kimberley a unique standing in North America as well, according to Priest.

"No other ski area has an airport within 20 minutes," he said. "When people need to travel to major business destinations, they can. (The opportunities) are unfolding on a daily basis."

Priest said the advantages of the improvements are being felt beyond Cranbrook and Kimberley.

"It's good for the whole southeast of B.C.," said Priest.

Priest said the region's growth is unprecedented as word spreads about the expansion opportunities, adding that in the 21 years that he has lived in the area, he has "seen more help wanted ads in the last three years than in the previous 18 combined."

Priest added that although Cranbrook doesn't have the same recreational amenities that Kimberley has, as the region's largest centre, the city of Cranbrook is poised for visitors to use "as the hub of the wheel."

"The opportunity is tremendous," said Ogilvie. "I think it's bigger than anyone even imagined."

The ripple effect

East Kootenay MLA Bill Bennett said in a separate interview that he has long believed the airport expansion was the key to unlocking the region's potential.

"I've been promoting the airport expansion since I was president of the local chamber of commerce in Cranbrook in 1997," said Bennett. "I believe that it is probably the single most important component of long-term sustainable growth in the tourism sector for our region. Our region has always suffered from the challenges of accessing what we have here. There has never been a shortage of good products and, of course, the natural amenities are unparalleled, but it's a hard place to get to if you're from Europe or the eastern United States."

Bennett said expansion opens up new markets around the world for the East Kootenay for recreation, but he doesn't restrict the potential to tourism.

"It's way bigger than that," said Bennett. "I think we would be limiting our understanding of what this means if we thought it was just going to be a growth in the tourism sector. I think, frankly, that it will also mean that people who come here and ski and golf and climb mountains and do the things that we do will see what we have to offer and some people will come back and they'll invest. They'll start a business or they'll buy a business or set up a light manufacturing business in our area because they can see that it's a good place to live and raise a family and to do business."

"I think it will be the kind of epicentre that sends out a lot of ripples in all directions and I don't think we fully appreciate yet how far and how diverse those ripples are going to be." KB

Taking flight

Phillip Elchitz, managing director of the Canadian Rockies International Airport—owned by the City of Cranbrook and managed by Vancouver Airport Services Ltd.—listed some of the most important changes.

CANADA BORDER SERVICES AGENCY "Having Canadian Customs is a very important component of the expanded facility in order to have international flights," said Elchitz. "The building was designed to ensure Canadian Customs would be in place."

IMPROVED DEPARTURES AND SECURITY There will be eight departure check-in kiosks—compared to the current five—when the departures lounge in Phase 2 is completed. Outbound security will be improved to meet current International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards.

FOCUS ON THE LANDSCAPE Incredible views will greet newly arrived visitors upon landing at the airport. The runway- and mountain-facing side of the building will be made mostly of glass, which Elchitz said was "designed because the mountains will really give visitors a sense of place."

MOVABLE WALLS The terminal has been constructed to allow for expansion as the demands for space increase. The interior walls can be moved to accommodate incoming flights—separating domestic and international arrivals—for Canadian Customs purposes.