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Canada Jetlines Ltd. says it plans to base its Montreal operations out of Saint-Hubert Longueuil Airport

By Ross Marowits

Discount airline Canada Jetlines Ltd. says it plans to base its Montreal operations in a couple of years out of a small airport that is undergoing an expansion.

The Vancouver-based company hasn't yet launched service, but on Thursday, it announced a partnership with Montreal Saint-Hubert Longueuil Airport to support its efforts to build a low-cost secondary airport on the south shore of the city.

Canada Jetlines CEO Javier Suarez says Montreal travellers deserve low-cost air travel options that don't require them to cross the U.S. border.

"Saint-Hubert is a short commute out of the downtown core of Montreal, and our passengers will not only benefit from ultra-low airfares, they will also have convenient access to a new purpose-built low-cost facility in Saint-Hubert," he said in a news release.

Saint-Hubert airport is about a 15-minute drive from downtown Montreal and 32 kilometres from Montréal–Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport.

The airline is working towards a launch next summer and would seek to start Montreal service by early 2020. It will also fly to secondary airports in Abbotsford, B.C., Hamilton, as well as Halifax Stanfield International Airport, offering domestic service and winter flights to sun destinations. It plans to start with two Airbus A320s and add four planes annually.

Saint-Hubert airport, which mainly serves private aircrafts, recently upgraded its runway – supported by a \$13-million federal contribution – that can accommodate narrowbody planes as big as the Boeing 737 or A320. It also plans to build a new passenger terminal.

"With this announcement and this commitment we're going to have to fast-track something," said Jane Foyle, general manager of DASH-L, the non-profit organization that runs the Saint Hubert airport.

"I think we can deliver for 2020. If there's interest to start faster we're also looking at what we could use at the airport at the moment as a temporary type facility."

Ms. Foyle has a vision for Saint-Hubert joining a national network of secondary airports that offer lower fees to support the Canadian expansion of ultra low cost airlines like Swoop and Flair Airlines.

“If we had a network of ultra low cost airports across Canada, I think that’s what we want to be part of,” she said in an interview. “Abbotsford in B.C. is that already. Hamilton is at that game too but their cost structure might not be as flexible as ours will be. We’re going to be financially attractive for airlines to come here.”

Discount carrier Flair Airlines says it is reviewing options for the Quebec market and hasn’t made a firm commitment to any airport in the province.

WestJet subsidiary Swoop said as its fleet increases to 10 next year it will be looking for markets and airports for its 189-seat planes.

“This could potentially include service to Quebec, but I’m unable to confirm that for you at this time,” said spokeswoman Karen McIsaac.

Porter Airlines spokesman Brad Cicero says the airline based at Toronto Island’s Billy Bishop Airport has no plans to change its Trudeau airport-based service out of Montreal.

Ms. Foyle said catering to ultra low cost carriers can be risky because their success is unproven in Canada. But she also hopes to offer flights to transport business people to Toronto, be a hub for regional service in Quebec and attract travel airlines like Sunwing and Air Transat for flights south.

She said the main challenge is to secure designated airport status that will provide security screening services from the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority at an affordable rate and obtain customs and immigration services from the Canada Border Services Agency to offer transborder flights.

Ms. Foyle said Saint-Hubert airport can also help in keeping Quebecers from crossing the U.S. border to catch flights.

“We’re losing a lot of Canadians that are going to Plattsburgh and Burlington to fly out of American airports and we would be strategically located to try to get these passengers, these Quebecers back and flying out of our airlines potentially and our airport.”