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Red Deer Airport's prospects are looking up for 2019

By Lana Michelin

The CEO of Red Deer Airport says he's received a letter of intent from an ultra-low-cost airline interested in providing service out of central Alberta.

While he cannot yet name the carrier, Graham Ingham said the non-binding letter is based on a \$9-million proposed airport terminal and apron expansion going ahead in 2019.

He's optimistic these upgrades can be started with a federal grant that was applied for and will be announced next spring.

Construction is expected to take six months for the terminal and three months for the apron. If these projects are started in March, they could be ready by September, said Ingham, who believes it's possible that Red Deer-area residents will once again have air service to Calgary, Edmonton or beyond before the end of next year.

This will be welcome news to many central Alberta residents, who have been without local passenger service since Air Canada's regional service pulled out for financial reasons at the end of October.

Since then, Ingham has been in touch with four ultra-low-cost carriers: Enerjet, Canada Jetlines, Swoop and Flair Air. He said three out of the four were interested in having discussions about the prospect of operating out of Red Deer, but Ingham couldn't reveal more for competitive reasons.

He credits county and city officials for being behind the expansion project that will enable the airport to regain passenger service and better serve existing clients.

Red Deer Airport is one of the busiest regional airports in Canada. He said the terminal and apron upgrades will be needed, regardless of whether passenger service is attained, because of the high volume of take offs and landings.

If the grant doesn't come through for the construction projects, Ingham added, "We will move on with Plan B" — which is to look to municipal and private funding sources and loans.

Representatives from Swoop could not be reached for comment on Tuesday. But Canada Jetlines director of corporate development, Jennifer Paterson, said "we are evaluating our (markets) right now and certainly we are interested in Red Deer."

While the Vancouver-based airline is not yet operational, it's hoping to get off the ground in 2019. Enerjet is in a similar position.

Enerjet's CEO and president Thomas Morgan said, "Of course, Red Deer is on our radar! All of central Alberta is on our radar." Morgan feels the Red Deer Airport's central location is ideal: "It's smack in the middle of Alberta, is easy to get to, and has good parking."

The main problems are the too-small terminal and the apron that needs "fixing," he said — but both obstacles are surmountable. Morgan's working on getting Enerjet ready to launch over the next few months.

Jim Scott, CEO of Flair Air, said his airline is looking at Eastern markets right now, but could be in a position to assess new Alberta markets in 2019. Scott said, "We like (Red Deer) airport and the length of its runway. It's close to several catchment areas, as well as Edmonton and Calgary."