

## Clipping their wings

### **Air travel produces more greenhouse gases per passenger than any other form of travel, yet it keeps expanding**

**HENRY AUBIN, The Gazette Published: March 13, 2008**

Aéroports de Montréal, which runs Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport, is certainly optimistic about the future of air travel. To handle future traffic, it is continuing with an airport modernization that has already cost \$1.5 billion since 2000. It is also expanding onto a golf course bordering the tarmac. And it has started to build a rail station in anticipation of a shuttle train to downtown.

An earlier generation of airport planners were overly optimistic about the future of Montreal-based air travel when they built Mirabel. Is this expansion of Trudeau also unrealistic? Is the aviation industry as a whole being too rosy when it assumes open-ended growth in air travel globally?

What makes these questions relevant is climate change.

An airplane uses far more fossil fuel to transport a person than any car, ship or train. Yet aviation has so far received little attention as a contributor to global warming. The Kyoto accord never included international flights in its long list of sources of greenhouse gases.

The International Air Transport Association estimates that airplanes account for three per cent of all man-made greenhouse-gas emissions. That might not sound like much. But high-altitude emissions are far more damaging to the atmosphere than those at ground level. As well, emissions are growing at a remarkably fast clip. Aéroports de Montréal predicts annual increases of three or four per cent between now and 2010, and a slightly lesser rate thereafter. IATA predicts five per cent annual growth in both passengers and freight worldwide between now and 2011 - with China and the developing world fuelling much of this boom.

There's an obvious contradiction in all this. The federal government, which oversees aviation in Canada, is backing the expansion of the industry (by giving financial help to such companies as Quebec-based Bombardier) and its infrastructure (airports). Yet Prime Minister Stephen Harper also insists Canada's emissions in 2050 will be at least 60 per cent lower than what they were in 2006. That works out to about 49 per cent below the level in 1990, the internationally recognized baseline year.

Canada is one of many countries that is nurturing aviation growth while at the same time vowing to crack down on emissions. But this contradiction will be harder to maintain in a post-Bush world. The main contenders for the White House say they'll seek to cut emissions by a whopping 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050 (Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton) or by 60 per cent (John McCain). Canada will have to get more serious.

To be sure, ways exist to lower the emissions of planes - towing planes to the runway, for example, or having them glide in for landings. New technology is also likely to make planes consume less kerosene per kilometre. Still, most experts say air travel's projected growth would nullify any such efficiencies. And Britain's Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution has concluded: "Alternate aviation fuels, most notably hydrogen, (are) unlikely to prove practicable and could even have the potential to be more damaging than kerosene.

So, how do you reconcile air travel with a global campaign against climate change?

The most obvious way is to make the financial cost of air travel better reflect its environmental cost. International flights now enjoy a double immunity: Not only are they exempt from the Kyoto Protocol but airlines pay no tax on their fuel. I've loved those cheap \$450 Montreal-Paris roundtrip tickets, but such prices are an environmental absurdity.

A carbon tax ought also to apply to the booming field of air freight, which now offers overnight delivery of practically everything. I like next-day deliveries of books and DVDs from far away, but they're sacrifices I'll gladly make.

As for short-haul travel, improvement of the rail and bus systems would make them more attractive options.

How does this kind of future affect what's happening at Trudeau airport?

First, it raises the question of whether the airport needs so much modernization - new gates and the like.

Second, it strengthens the argument against expanding the airport and related light industry onto the 36-hole golf course. Montreal's master plan, adopted in 2004, and Dorval's own post-demerger master plan agree that the land should stay as green space. That would help make Montreal Island's high taxes easier for residents to stomach.

But a more environmentally aware future does not weaken the case for the shuttle train. The new line would extend west to Ste. Anne de Bellevue and offer frequent service for commuters - a good way to get them out of their cars. Even if the airport's business were to shrink, the proposed rail line makes sense.

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