

**Submission
No 9**

INQUIRY INTO REGIONAL AVIATION SERVICES

Organisation: Narrandera Shire Council

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NARRANDERA – LEETON AIRPORT

**INQUIRY INTO REGIONAL AVIATION
SERVICES**

SUBMISSION

Narrandera Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to lodge a submission to the inquiry into regional aviation services. Air services are one of the most important regional issues having a direct impact upon business, tourism, health and lifestyle.

The uncertainty associated with regional air services continues to have a negative impact upon rural communities. The continued growth and development of this region is dependent upon a reliable and acceptable air service.

Adequacy of Commercial Air Services in Regional and Rural Australia

The Narrandera – Leeton Airport is jointly operated and controlled by both Councils. Both Councils have established a strong working alliance with Regional Express (REX) from the former Kendell and Hazelton Airlines.

The daily service to and from Sydney provided by Regional Express is vital for this region. The airport services a wide catchment area with a population of 20,000.

As with other rural centres Narrandera and Leeton communities rely heavily upon regular daily flights in and out of Sydney in suitable time frames. It is essential that Federal and State governments continue to support and maximise regional aviation services.

The Narrandera – Leeton Airport is well utilised with annual RPT passenger numbers of approximately 12,000 per year.

One concern of Council however is should the security environment change and all ports with RPT services into Sydney be required to implement baggage screening the significant costs associated with implementing along with staffing would be significant and outside the scope of Council's finances.

For this reason Council supports Federal or State Government funding for the implementation of baggage screening.

Policies and Measures required to assist in the development of Regional Air Services

Narrandera Shire Council is strongly opposed to the Narrandera – Leeton service to Sydney being reduced to a regional hub service.

Hub services have a proven record of failure and significantly inflate the cost of air services. The introduction of a hub service would damage the economic development of this region. It would result in fewer passengers flying as flight times and costs would increase. This would lead to a drop off in visitors and business

investment. Council considers that under this scenario many more people would elect to drive to Sydney, having implications for road safety and business competitiveness.

In its current form, a number of staff work from the Airport on a daily basis and any move to hub services would threaten the viability of those positions.

Small Scale Owner Operator Services

Historically this region has been serviced by Airlines of NSW, Hazelton Airlines and currently Regional Express. All of these airlines have provided a reliable and regular service using medium size planes. The Narrandera – Leeton Airport has a range of support services in place, such as fuelling facilities, navigational aids, terminal facilities and associated support services that ensure the viability of this type of service and plane.

It is felt that small scale owner operator services would not provide this continuity of service and for safety and reliability concerns would be resisted by many people, both from within the business sector and across the wider community.

For this reason Council requests that medium size planes such as the SAAB 340 or similar continue to service rural Airports such as Narrandera – Leeton.

The Deployment of Most Suitable Aircraft Types

There is strong anecdotal evidence that there would be resistance to the smaller aircraft. The existing service into Narrandera is a SAAB 340, which is ideally suited to this route. Council favours regular and reliable services through a medium size carrier. The introduction of smaller competing services is not considered a priority by Council.

Interconnectivity

It is essential that regional air services fly into the Airport from which interstate and international flights are available. Council is aware of previous investigations into diverting regional carriers to Bankstown Airport and reject this proposal totally.

Role of Governments

Both Federal and State governments must continue to provide support and maintain a regulatory function in safeguarding air services in regional Australia. It is Council

understands that the former Kendell and Hazelton Airlines were economically sustainable and that their demise was a result of problems within the parent company. However notwithstanding the importance of economically viable routes market forces alone must not be allowed to dictate the face of regional air services. Governments should monitor the industry so that service levels are maintained and concepts such as hub services and flying in and out of Bankstown Airport are not countenanced.

The former Hazelton Airline had an excellent working relationship within the region and Council welcomes the proactive approach taken by Regional Express in carrying this tradition on.

Local Government Reform

Currently New South Wales is going through a period of uncertainty in local government where the long term viability of smaller rural Council's is in question. In Council's case there is a recommendation that it merge with Leeton Shire Council and or form part of a larger Council governed by Griffith City Council.

In relation to Narrandera – Leeton Airport, Council is concerned that its RPT services will cease and or be diverted to the larger Griffith community. This proposed loss of service would force a population base of 20,000 to either travel to Griffith and or Wagga Wagga for regular RPT services.

Council is also concerned that if it was forced into a merged larger regional Council funding for asset renewal of its Airport would be severely decreased. For example funding to reseal runways, taxiways, aprons etc. would compete against other priorities as part of a larger regional Council.

Conclusion

Council believes that this inquiry provides a good opportunity to set the parameters for the ongoing and sustained development of the industry across regional Australia. The Narrandera and Leeton communities rely heavily upon air services for their development and growth. Council urge the inquiry committee to bring forward recommendations that will acknowledge the importance of air services to the growth and development of regional Australia to ensure regional carriers remain competitive.

Executive Summary

The Airport's history dates back to 1940 when the Commonwealth destabilised it as part of the Empire Training Scheme. It is situated between the two main population centres of Narrandera and Leeton.

The Airport is a Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) certified and also a security controlled airport. The existing infrastructure includes two runways, two taxiways, aircraft parking apron areas for Regular Public Transport (RPT) and General Aviation (GA), a passenger terminal building, hangars, public car park, access and service roads, navigational and landing aids, ground lighting, aircraft fuel storage and refuelling facilities and Bureau of Meteorology weather station.

Regional Express Airlines (REX) currently provides the RPT services.

Airport Operations

Currently there are (23) RPT flights per week scheduled through Narrandera – Leeton Airport. From Monday to Friday there are two flights from Griffith to Sydney in the morning and two flights from Sydney to Griffith in the afternoon. On Saturday there is one flight from Griffith to Sydney and on Sunday there are two flights from Sydney to Griffith.

The Airport is equipped with facilities for both day and night operations, it is currently serviced by:

- RPT airline Regional Express (REX) with SAAB 340 aircraft flying between Griffith and Sydney;
- Regular courier, small volume air freight services;
- Emergency services including medical evacuations by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) and the Aerial Ambulance;
- Ultra lite aircraft;
- Military aircraft, and
- General aviation (local and itinerate) aircraft.

Narrandera Shire Council also provides lease areas and facilities for aviation and non aviation related activities.

Regional Characteristics

The Narrandera and Leeton Shire Council areas are situated in the south west corner of New South Wales approximately 440km south west of Sydney, Narrandera Shire has an area of 4,116 square kilometres and Leeton Shire an area of 1,167 square kilometres.

Both Council's are located in the Murrumbidgee region which is traversed by the Murrumbidgee River and contains the Murrumbidgee and other irrigation areas.

Air Transport

The nearest certified airports to Narrandera – Leeton Airport with RPT services are Wagga Wagga, Griffith and Albury. All have services to Sydney, with Wagga Wagga and Albury also providing services to Melbourne. The services at Narrandera – Leeton Airport form part of the Griffith – Sydney route.