



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

TRAN • NUMBER 005 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

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Chair

Mr. Merv Tweed

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• (1635)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC)): Thank you, and good afternoon everyone. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, meeting number five, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2). We are studying Nav Canada's airport traffic services.

I'll note to committee members that because of the late votes, we'll be sitting for one hour, and I will give notice of a subcommittee meeting early next week, if that's okay.

Joining us today from Nav Canada is Larry Lachance, the assistant vice-president of operational support in operations; Rudy Kellar, vice-president of operations; and John Crichton, president and chief executive officer at the head office.

Because of time, I'll ask you to make your presentation and then we'll move right into questions.

Welcome.

Mr. John Crichton (President and Chief Executive Officer, Head Office, Nav Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of Parliament. Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to speak to the committee regarding Nav Canada's current review of airport traffic services.

Accompanying me, as the chairman indicated, is Rudy Kellar, our vice-president of operations, and Larry Lachance, the assistant vice-president of operations.

Nav Canada is the private non-share capital company that owns and operates the second-largest civil air navigation system in the world. There are some 5,200 Nav Canada employees from coast to coast, providing vital air traffic control, flight information, and other services in support of those who fly in Canadian skies.

As many of you will remember, on November 1, 1996, we purchased the air navigation system from the federal government for \$1.5 billion and assumed responsibility for the system's operation. We are completely self-financing and receive no government funding whatsoever.

In the past 12 years aviation has evolved significantly, and we have worked closely with our customers to ensure that the air navigation system has evolved along with it. We have invested more than \$1.3 billion in new systems, facilities, and equipment, and in our people, with excellent results. Safety has improved, flight delays are down, our technology is leading edge, and our service charges have evolved at far less than the rate of inflation, and I am proud to

say that Nav Canada people are known around the globe as the best in the business.

Still, changes in customer needs and technology are continuous, and we must keep pace. Indeed, change has affected everything at Nav Canada, from how air traffic controllers track aircraft to the management of flight data to the provision of vital weather information and to aircraft approach guidance. And I must say that the continued modernization of the Canadian air navigation system is viewed with admiration wherever I travel around the world. That modernization drive has put Canada on the map as a centre of excellence in its field, as other air navigation systems have begun to buy our technology solutions, developed right here by Nav Canada engineers and air traffic controllers.

As one would expect, traffic volumes have also changed at many airports and will naturally continue to do so over time. We monitor those traffic volumes and regularly assess our services to ensure we are supporting safe and efficient operations in a cost-effective way.

In early December we released a discussion paper to solicit input from employees, customers, and other stakeholders regarding air traffic services required at 46 separate airports. Following a review of the input received and an additional follow-on analysis, we have decided not to propose any changes at 18 of the airports in that original paper.

Last week we announced our intention to initiate aeronautical studies to further examine specific proposals for changes at 26 airports. Generally these proposals involve reducing the hours of operation of two airport control towers and five flight service stations; closing eight flight service stations, to be replaced with remote aerodrome advisory services, which is a similar service provided by another flight service station remotely—two of these flight service stations are collocated with towers, and the towers would remain operational; and finally, removing remote aerodrome advisory service from 11 very low-traffic airports.

Additionally, we are seeking further input regarding service requirements in northwestern Ontario prior to formulating service proposals for Kenora and Thunder Bay airports.

I must emphasize that we have made no decision at this time, other than to initiate aeronautical studies, to examine these proposals further. The aeronautical studies will involve broad consultation, detailed operational analysis, as well as a complete hazard and risk analysis. This process will take several months.

If the conclusion of a study is to recommend that a service change be made, no changes will be implemented until Transport Canada, our safety regulator, has reviewed the completed study and it's in agreement that implementation would not unacceptably increase the risk to aviation safety.

● (1640)

Nav Canada's core mandate, and indeed our only real product, is safety. That will be our unwavering focus as we complete these studies, but service to our customers and the cost effectiveness of our service must also be a factor.

Our flight service specialists and air traffic controllers serve a vital function and enhance the safety of operations when traffic levels are moderate to high. Of course, the key factor is the presence, or absence, of air traffic. It must be said that the value of the air traffic services function is minimal when traffic levels are so low that pilots could have coordinated their respective activities directly on common radio frequencies, as they have done safely for decades at hundreds of airports across the country.

Pilots require certain essential information to operate safely. None of these proposals would remove that information, but they ensure it is provided through other means.

To conclude, before we go to questions, I would like to say how deeply proud I am of Nav Canada's record as a privatized air navigation service and especially of our people at all our facilities across Canada.

Our approach to making changes to level of service is very much in line with this record. That approach is measured, consultative, and we believe very much in tune with the expectations of our customers and with Transport Canada, the safety regulator.

Mr. Chairman, we would be pleased to take the committee's questions. Merci.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Volpe.

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Thank you very much for your presentation, and thank you to the three of you for coming to share some of your views with us.

Forgive me, but as a member who represents one of the biggest airports in North America, when I read that flight delays are down, I thought it was nice for three serious men to come in and introduce an element of humour. It's not my experience at Pearson, but at any rate I'm taking your word for it. I didn't see you smile or chuckle. It was just a humorous intervention, but it does raise an issue for us.

What you've also said in that same phrase is that your service charges have evolved at a rate far less than the rate of inflation. Typically that happens when you introduce efficiencies by reducing personnel, improving technology, or just providing less service. Which of those three is the underlying one for such a low rate of increase?

Mr. John Crichton: The primary source of our efficiencies has been, first of all, a restructuring of the business after we took over from the government 12 years ago, which mostly revolved around the administrative portion of the business. To give you an order of

the magnitude of that, at the time we took over on November 1, 1996, there were 6,300 employees transferred from the government to us, and approximately two years later, after the administrative restructuring, there were 5,300. None of that affected the operation. None of it was related to operational service delivery.

The major efficiency source for our company, and indeed for people in our business, in fact, is productivity through technology. There has been very little head-count change—if I could put it that way—from levels of service. Levels of service—while they may go down in one area, they have to go up in another. When we took over the system, it was chronically short of air traffic controllers. The staffing rate when we took over was only 85% of requirements. We have now brought that up to over 100%. So we in fact added 200 to 300 air traffic controllers to our population of employees. That's included in those numbers. It has really been through good business management and not related to the levels of service. If anything, our levels of service overall have gone up.

● (1645)

Hon. Joseph Volpe: “Overall” is the key word, but in your review you're actually looking at cutting back service in several airports, are you not?

Mr. John Crichton: Yes.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I guess you've probably encountered some push-back on that, even though you might make your argument that you're not really putting anything at risk from a security and safety point of view. But you are putting economic livelihood at some risk at some of those airports and the communities they serve, are you not?

Mr. John Crichton: We don't believe so. It has not been our experience that the use of an airport is in any way related to the services we provide at it. Rather, what attracts airlines, if you will to, fly to a particular point is a market that's completely unrelated to the level of air traffic services we provide. We have never found any connection to that. It is not a “build it and they will come” situation. We react to traffic volumes, which is the key determinant of the safety issue, and we will provide service in accordance with the volumes that are there. Our service does not drive economic development nor does it influence airlines' decisions on where they fly.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: When you cut back on some of your service you need the support or the approval of Transport Canada before you do that, do you not?

Mr. John Crichton: Yes, that's correct.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Presumably part of their mandate would be to ensure that nothing undermines the safety of any of the flights in and/or out of that airport. But when you cut back on some service, you essentially would require, by implication, that the carrier, the airline or whoever operates a plane or a helicopter out of a particular airport, would probably have to restructure the flight times at the very least.

Mr. John Crichton: No. I guess the simplest analogy to use is the difference between an airport control service where there's a tower and an airport advisory service, which is either a flight service station on site or a remote advisory service. It would be similar to an intersection that has traffic lights and one that simply has stop signs—the traffic lights being the control service where there is no discretion for drivers, if it's red you come to a stop and so on, and an intersection where there are traffic signs where it's left to the discretion of the drivers to know when to proceed through an intersection. That's the case throughout the world. It has worked extremely well in aviation. In essence it is a volume-driven decision one would make as to when you need to go from one service to another, as I'm sure it is in road traffic.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: You have an airport like Buttonville in Toronto, which is one of the busiest in the country in terms of volume and in terms of obviously the number of planes that use that airport, and you're contemplating cutting back services to Buttonville. It's in the middle of a very quickly growing part of the GTA. Do you not envisage difficulties or challenges to safety as a result?

• (1650)

Mr. John Crichton: Originally there was a review of Buttonville. There was no proposal to change the service. We have announced we're not going to make any changes there. If there had been a proposal for change it probably would have been something related to the hours of operation of the tower, which is a pretty minor change. But we are not proposing any changes there.

The Chair: Monsieur Lemay.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I will take this a bit further than Mr. Volpe did. I am the federal member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

You are on the verge of "killing off" our two airports. I am speaking to Mr. Killer, who wears his name well. We will not accept that. You are destroying what we built over 20 years in Rouyn-Noranda and Val D'Or. Do you want me to show you the map? There's nothing left in the north. Rouyn-Noranda and Val D'Or are the gateways to the north. You are using YUL numbers and you are saying that Rouyn-Noranda and Val D'Or have fewer movements in total, so there has to be a pullback.

I want to understand something. When Air Canada Jazz cancels two flights a day into our region, when in fact they should be maintained, does that affect your decisions? I'd like a brief answer.

[English]

Mr. John Crichton: It would depend. Two flights a day probably wouldn't influence our decisions.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: The reason there are private companies which service the north is because there is a lot of mining exploration and extraction, whether it's by Xstrata or other companies in the north. They absolutely need those two airports, Rouyn-Noranda and Val D'Or. Does that influence your decision at all?

[English]

Mr. John Crichton: I think the simplest way to explain the issue is.... I'm looking at the traffic page for Rouyn-Noranda right now, and over the past three years the average highest amount of traffic per hour at that airport has been four movements. For most hours of the day it is less than two movements per hour. That's on the basis of the last three years of traffic.

When we are assessing airport traffic services, we are certainly guided to a great degree by the actual volume of traffic at the airports in question. That will drive the service decision as to what is required.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: We have just received a letter about that. It is fairly strange that you are telling us there are two movements per hour. Your calculations are based on a period of 24 hours, whereas the airport is not open 24 hours a day. But it must provide the service 24 hours day. You are on the point of undertaking a study.

So will we be consulted with regard to the study you will undertake in our riding?

[English]

Mr. John Crichton: Oh, absolutely. You'll be consulted. There will be extensive consultations with any and all interested parties. There will be a specific safety study done using the Canadian Standards Association's methodologies. There will be a hazard and risk analysis. All of this needs to satisfy the independent safety regulator, Transport Canada, before we would proceed.

This is the beginning of a consultative process. It's far from the end.

• (1655)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: When your letter was made public, the media in our area jumped on it and reported that our airports would close. We are currently negotiating with airlines to provide service between, for instance, Sherbrooke, Rouyn-Noranda and Toronto, or between Gatineau, Rouyn-Noranda and Toronto. But the negotiations abruptly ended yesterday.

That's what interests me. Why wasn't there a press release to inform our local media that this only represented the beginning of a review? Based on what you're saying, no decision has been taken, Mr. Crichton. No decision has been taken.

Is that what you're saying?

[English]

Mr. John Crichton: Certainly as far as I know, all our public statements with respect to this process have made the essential elements of the process abundantly clear. And it's far from a *fait accompli*.

My experience with the media around the country is that there are varying levels of interpretations that get put on things. It's all there for anyone to see. It's on our website. It's in our communications. I don't know where people get the idea to go along with what you just told me. But if there are specific media outlets in the Abitibi that you want us to talk to, we'll be happy to do so.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay: When you begin the process—because you're saying that you are at the start of a process—will that happen in our area? Are you going to visit us, you and your team, so we can show you what a regional airport looks like?

[*English*]

Mr. John Crichton: Yes. These analyses involve meetings on site with any stakeholders who want to provide input. They're arranged in advance and that will happen.

The Chair: Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses here.

I come from a remote region of Canada as well, the Northwest Territories, where of course aviation service is very important to us. With the difficulty with the changing climate we have in the north, we see that weather conditions are proving to be even more of a problem with aviation than they have in the past. If you examine the incidence reports, you'll see that weather-related incidents are probably one of the highest problems you have at the airports.

Nav Canada issued the following directions to their site managers in terms of reduced and low visibility operations. The responsible airport authority managers are cautioned not to enter into any agreement that places responsibility on ATS for keeping airport authority informed of these changing conditions.

Transport Canada has implemented requirements that airports implement reduced visibility operations when visibility is below half a mile. The only source of this information in many cases at all airports in the Northwest Territories and at most airports in Canada is from Nav Canada equipment and personnel. Notification is essential. You receive regular weather observations as part of your normal responsibilities. You receive reports from pilots and note whenever the visibility is below half a mile and a quarter of a mile. So you're not providing this information to the local people.

You have suggested that perhaps you can provide this through phone calls to local offices. Respectfully, many northern airports don't have personnel working at the office 24 hours a day.

So why are you refusing to notify the airport operators of this critical information, which you gather as part of your normal responsibilities and which of course we must pay for?

• (1700)

Mr. Larry Lachance (Assistant Vice-President, Operational Support, Operations, Nav Canada): If I may respond, Mr. Chairman, we issued some directives to our units not too long ago. The reason these directives were issued to our units was that there was a potential liability aspect. Under the airport certificate it is the airport's authority and responsibility to issue the conditions under

which low visibility operations procedures or reduced visibility operations procedures have to take place.

That being said, we're currently into some discussions with the Canadian Airports Council authority as to the sharing of the information. We have already, at most of our major airports, a system in place where we do share the information. And the information the airports are seeking is what we refer to as runway visual range, RVR, information. Basically where the RVR information is available, we currently have established with the CAC representative a process where the airport authority will call the Nav Canada facilities in order to get the information.

What you have to keep in mind is that given the operation we're in on a daily basis, it's pretty difficult, on occasion, to be in a position to relay that information on a continuous basis. So we have a mechanism in place right now that is being looked at where the information will be provided to the airport authority.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: It seems, then, that your primary concern is your liability rather than the safety of the operators. I just want to go on to say that in some ways Nav Canada is responding to a business model incentive to serve big communities, not small communities. The problem is that Nav Canada makes its money based on weight and frequency of flights. When you analyze airports and the conditions they fly in and the requirements for safety for the people who are flying in them, you'll have to take into account many other factors.

We have airports that, because of their location, because of their weather conditions, are hazardous to fly into many times. We've had significant and serious accidents in the Northwest Territories because of the availability of weather information on a timely basis. This is one of the biggest problems we have.

Right now this government is investing \$300 million for airport security. I'd like to see what they're putting into improving the ability of our pilots to understand what the weather is at the airports, which is really killing people, which is really causing significant problems in small airports right across this country.

How do you feel about that? How do you feel about your ability to provide the proper weather services to the pilots so that they can deal with the conditions at these small airports?

Mr. John Crichton: Well, Mr. Bevington, let me reassure you. First, I went north in 1972 and spent 25 years north of 60, building what is today the biggest airline there. I guess I'm as familiar with the difficulty with small airports in the Arctic as anybody is.

Since Nav Canada took over, I'm not aware of any accident in the north or elsewhere that was caused by our failure to live up to our obligations with respect to providing weather information.

• (1705)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Well, that's not really the question I had. It's not about your obligations, but the ability to provide adequate weather information for pilots. You have a business model that limits your liability. I'm not really concerned about whether you're responsible. I'm concerned about the planes that get caught up in bad weather and the pilots don't get adequate reporting on the way into those runways.

I'd just like to mention that I grew up on northern airports. My father was an airport manager. I understand the conditions of small airports very well. I know the deterioration in the service that's gone on since we've gone to these automated weather systems. We've gone to other forms that are just simply not adequate.

Mr. John Crichton: I'm simply telling you, number one, that we're very sensitive to the issue you raise. Not simply because it's a corporate policy are we sensitive, but some of the senior management of the company in fact live there and are very familiar with it. We go to great lengths to make sure we live up to that requirement to provide the weather to the aviation community, and we are doing that and we will continue to do that.

With respect to the specific issue you raised, I'm not totally familiar with that. I am making a commitment here and now to get back to you on that. I think there's more to what you raise than it appears at first blush. I will get all the facts and I will respond to the committee and to you on what the facts of the matter are. We are investing very significant sums of money in the north on our service. We continue to do that. In fact, the north receives levels of service in this country that are unheard of in other countries. That's an undertaking we gladly accepted when we took over, and we will live up to it.

The Chair: I would ask that if there is correspondence you do it through the chair and I'll see that it gets distributed.

Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, I appreciate Mr. Lemay's line of questioning, and since Mr. Laframboise actually asked for the meeting today with Nav Canada, the government would like to give them an opportunity to have our additional seven minutes, if that's all right with the chair.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Laframboise.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Thank you, Brian, that was nice of you.

We are aware of the pressure you are under. You represent a private company. In your statement, you said that your company has to be viable. You don't receive any government funding. Everyone is aware of the state of the industry today. Airline company representatives have told me that NAV Canada's rates cannot go up. However, you cannot neglect the regions just because you do not want to increase rates, which is understandable. Mr. Lemay earlier told you about the situation in Rouyn-Noranda and Val-d'Or. I looked at the analysis you conducted for Chibougamau, Havre-Saint-

Pierre, Blanc-Sablon and Natashquan. You are on the verge of making important changes. These communities—namely Nastahquan, Blanc-Sablon, Havre-Saint-Pierre and others—are isolated, and for them, some services, such as medevac flights, are essential services.

Can you guarantee that medevac flights will always be able to land at the airports in Chibougamau, Havre-Saint-Pierre, Blanc-Sablon and Natashquan despite any changes in the quality of the service? Can you guarantee this?

[*English*]

Mr. John Crichton: I won't go through what the guarantees in life are, but the changes we're proposing at these sites will not affect the access to the sites. We're not changing the approach aids. We're not changing the availability of weather and other essential information. This is simply a change to more efficiently handle.... We're talking about sites where the level of traffic, on average, during the day is less than one movement per hour. It is simply not efficient at those levels of activity to have someone there whose job is to advise pilots of other traffic in the area so that they don't run into it, because you reach a point where you're really trying to stop somebody from running into themselves.

We're not changing the ability of pilots to access the airports.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Mr. Crichton, even if there was only a single plane, the medevac, you cannot tell me that this service might be jeopardized. We have always provided this type of service to our communities. If your decision is purely based on economics, and if you need a bit of outside help to help you service these regions, you will have to ask for it. It's important that the communities retain the services they are used to. For those regions, medevac flights are the most important ones. I've been told that if you stop providing the service, the medevac flights might not land in those airports anymore. For me, this is a matter of utmost importance.

I understand that money is tight for you but your financial problems should never stand in the way of saving someone's life by providing access to these airports. If that's the case, you will have to meet with the government and say that, given current economic conditions, you cannot provide a quality service any more and ensure that those communities will be able to evacuate people with injuries, or people who have died, to fly them to a major hospital in Montreal or Quebec City. That will have to be done.

You can do all the studies you like. However, you have told us that you have no idea how many movements there are at Chibougamau, among other places, and that despite the lack of data, you know that there is less air traffic. I understand that you are experiencing financial problems. There has to be cost-effectiveness and you have to find money somewhere. The problem is that this cannot come at the cost of a single person's life. That's the problem. You said a little earlier that you could not provide me with any guarantees. I understand. You are an intelligent man and my information is probably correct. But it could jeopardize medevac flights at these airports. For me, this is unacceptable. I want you to understand where I'm coming from.

[English]

Mr. John Crichton: Yes, thank you. I understand, but I don't want you to misunderstand me. Nothing we are proposing here would in any way, shape or form limit the ability of medevac flights or any other kinds of flights to access the airports. That is simply not true.

This is not an exercise that's being driven by economics, in the sense that I think you were trying to express there. This is a routine reassessment of our levels of service, which is an ongoing process in the company and always will be. But the first consideration is safety. Nothing we're proposing here at any of these airports would in any way limit the ability of aircraft, including medevacs, to access them. And I would point out to the committee that there are literally hundreds of airports in this country at which we do not have any on-site services but which routinely handle medevac flights quite safely and without a problem. So that is not the issue here.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: Your decision might cause Propair, a local company, to leave. Propair represents \$15 million a year which is invested in Rouyn-Noranda. These people have just built a brand new building. If the flight service station closed, that would mean the loss of 14 jobs. Please understand that it makes no sense whatsoever. We are the gateway to the north. You might have the numbers, but what you're presenting us with is unacceptable to all of us who live there. My colleague has just talked about the eastern part of the province, but I'm talking about the western part. From Grande Rivière to Rouyn-Noranda, we service Hydro Quebec. If someone gets injured, the medevac would not be able to land.

Last Monday, the temperature varied between -2° and -26° over a distance of 100 kilometres. The airport at Rouyn was able to provide accurate information. Please understand just how important these airports are for those regions. I hope I've made myself clear. It doesn't make any sense at all. If you do close them down, the private sector companies will immediately go elsewhere. If Xstrata cannot operate in the north anymore, what are we going to do? I have nothing against Toronto, but we would lose everything.

There is development in the north. There is going to be a mining boom in Rouyn-Noranda and Val-d'Or. That's why we signed agreements with the airlines. So what will we do?

• (1715)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Crichton, do you have a response?

Mr. John Crichton: Monsieur Lemay, again, I don't want to sound like a broken record, but we have never run into a situation in which an airline made a decision to fly or not to fly based on our services.

Is my old friend, Mr. Pronovost, still running Propair? Maybe I need to talk to him, but I don't want to ascribe motives there.

When the time comes to visit the sites and get a better understanding of some of the issues you raised, I can assure you that we will listen most attentively to what people have to say. I'll add that if any evidence that is produced indicates to us that anything we're proposing to do would in any way degrade safety, limit the ability of a medevac aircraft to get in, or result in a wholesale shift of traffic or the limitation of an important service, we wouldn't do it. I can tell you right now that we wouldn't do it.

I am simply sharing with you that our experience to date, as well as my own experience of 40 years in aviation, indicates something different, but we will see when we go to the site, and we will listen to everybody.

The Chair: Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the panel members for coming out here.

I was going through the presentation you made. You stated that Nav Canada's core mandate, and your only real product, is safety. On the other hand, you said when you would implement this review and complete the study that "implementation would not unacceptably increase the risk to aviation safety".

To me, unacceptability should be, as Mr. Bevington said, any personal life. What do you mean by "unacceptably increase"? What did you mean by those comments when you talked about that?

Mr. John Crichton: If I'm not mistaken—and we'd have to check this—I believe that is actually language in the statute. I think it simply recognizes the fact, and this is from a regulatory point of view, so perhaps this question would be better directed toward Transport Canada.... I suspect that very subtle changes in something could, at least from a point of view of perception, change degrees or shades of this or that. Essentially I believe that's statutory language. It's not Nav Canada's language. I believe it's guidance for the safety regulations.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I'm talking about Nav Canada. I'm not talking about statutory language. I'm asking what you would tell the ordinary Canadian when they have concerns about safety. You said your core mandate is safety. I just want to know from you so that you can tell us and Canadians that they're not facing any additional loss of life when it comes to safety.

Mr. John Crichton: Oh, absolutely. And that's what we're saying; we would not propose something that we felt increased, in any material way at all, safety risk. We have both very objective and proven scientific methodologies to establish that. We also have some very subjective reviews that are made by people with the experience to do that.

So this is not a safety issue when it comes down, at the end of the day, to these things. It's not up to us. There is the independent safety regulator who reviews all that and then makes another judgment, and that's Transport Canada.

• (1720)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: You said that Nav Canada takes pride internationally when it comes to safety. How does Nav Canada's safety record compare internationally?

Mr. John Crichton: It's the best in the world.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Do the adverse environmental conditions in Canada make it any worse, or more challenging, for you to deal with these situations?

Mr. John Crichton: It's more challenging, but I'm very proud to tell this committee.... I hope to be in a position next year to in fact share with you some documents that will be made public, but I can tell you now, without providing the names of the other ANS providers, that we come out on top. We're the best in the world—in spite of the challenges we have.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: In your presentation you were also talking about unmanned navigation sites. Are they less safe than those with personnel on duty? If not, why not?

Mr. John Crichton: I think you're referring to remote aerodrome advisory services as opposed to on-site services. They're less expensive, but for airports like that, with very low traffic volumes—you're talking about one, two, or three movements an hour—the exact same level of service can be provided from a remote site.

This has been provided for years in this country, at scores of different sites. There have been no safety issues attributed to that method of providing service.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: So you're telling me that at those 11 airports where you're removing RAAS, it will be safe to land there?

Mr. John Crichton: For those that are losing it altogether, I think you'll find that at those airports the average movements per hour are one or less. In many general aviation airports in this country, and indeed in other countries, you have far more activity than that without any air traffic services. The pilots use such things as UNICOMs, which work quite satisfactorily. There are well-established procedures for operating it on controlled airports that have been there for fifty years.

What you're really identifying here are airports where the level of traffic has fallen to literally one or less movements per hour.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dhaliwal.

Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Crichton, thank you very much for your presentation. I actually had the delightful opportunity to visit the Nav Canada school in Cornwall about five years ago. It's quite a facility. I would recommend that others take the opportunity to go and visit. It's quite remarkable.

I'm from York region. I know you've said that nothing is going to change in your plans as far as Buttonville is concerned, and I know

there are other things going on there. But when you're making these assessments, what kinds of discussions do you have with the municipalities that surround? Buttonville, for instance, touches on four major municipalities. What kinds of discussions do you have with municipalities before you do your reassessments?

Mr. John Crichton: We publicize when it comes to specific proposals. We're at that stage now for 26 airports, but Buttonville is not one of them. These are publicized. We invite anyone who wants to provide comment to do so.

Typically, I think, depending on the amount of comment we get or the level of concern expressed, we will then, in some cases, hold public meetings and invite people to come and talk about their concerns. It partly depends on the nature of the change that's being proposed, but generally speaking, most of the people who are interested are customers or the airport itself.

We frequently get local municipalities concerned for economic development reasons, as some of the members expressed earlier. There is a bit of a problem for us there. We are not an economic development agency. We're not in the business of spending money to create jobs. We're in the business of running safe skies, and doing it in an efficient manner, but as safely as it is possible to do. That is somewhat incompatible with the understandable concern of a municipality about jobs.

I think the question of economic stimulus is best left to others. That's not part of what we do. We are very much focused on what our main job is, but we do listen to people in that regard and sometimes things come out that we didn't know about.

• (1725)

The Chair: Mr. Kennedy, you have about three minutes.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): I wonder if you could sort of rehearse this for the committee. You have a mandate that allows you to go through this process. You've designated the communities that you have coming forward in terms of where you want to make changes. Is that correct? You have 18 that are not on the list and you have the ones that are going to face some changes in terms of the level of service, as we've been discussing.

Mr. John Crichton: Yes. I believe we gave you a copy of the notice. There are 26 different sites. The notice sets out the proposal, which will be subject to the consultation and the study that I indicated.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: In terms of the dynamics of the business, this particular safety service, which you've now turned into a business, what has changed materially at those sites? In other words, you picked up the service with those specifications: a certain amount of activity and a certain amount of dead zones, no doubt, some economically viable, some less economically viable.

There are other thresholds of viability you've talked about. Is there something common to those 26? Has the need for the service gone down? Has it plummeted? Has it changed quite a bit? Is that the dynamic that you're bringing through this process? Or is it a change in your assessment of what's needed in those places? Is it possible to characterize it?

Mr. John Crichton: It's a combination of, generally speaking, a reduction in traffic volumes and the availability of newer and better technology to provide the service in a more efficient way, in a different way. It's a combination of those things.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: On the bona fides of the new technology component—and I don't know what the weighting would be between the two in terms of the things you've done—who validates that? Obviously, you're an expert and you have a safety business. No one has questioned that. It's more than a clever slogan.

You wouldn't be in business if safety wasn't your business, but who outside of that can we rely on to tell us that these technological advancements exist and can be depended on? I'm sure Transport Canada does a certain amount of due diligence, but where we stand today, who has done that? What references exist for our feeling confident that those advancements have taken place?

Mr. John Crichton: There are really two outside entities. The first is the customers. If the customers don't agree with it, we won't do it.

A subset of that, in our case in particular, would be the pilots and sometimes even the pilots' unions, who attend our consultative sessions and take part in them. They get to see and sign on or disagree with our technology before we'll do it. So those people who are paying the freight—and indeed, in the case of the pilots, you could say they're betting their lives on it—have effectively, in our business, a veto.

Second is our safety regulator, Transport Canada. These things have to pass muster with them as well.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: Just a very quick follow-up.

I don't have the expertise of some people at the table, such as Mr. Bevington and others have expressed, or a local community affected, but if it's a technical change I would have thought that rather than a

marketplace condition—because you are the sole provider of service—if they're going to land there, they're going to use your services, such as they are. Who has the competence to evaluate those technological advancements so that we can believe this advancement can be relied on because you took up the business at a certain price, at a certain cost, and so on?

I think everybody wants to understand what's at work here, and if there are technological advancements that make things safe. If these changes are just transitions, we should understand and then approve or let Transport Canada approve. Who can tell us that technology does what you say it does, aside from the practice? I don't want to be crude about it, but you wouldn't want to learn in practice whether it works. It must be in place elsewhere; there must be bodies, international bodies perhaps, that validate this technology.

● (1730)

Mr. John Crichton: Yes, there are in certain cases. In order for me to answer your question accurately we would have to get into the specifics of which technologies or which combination of technologies, but I know what you're driving at. I can assure you there's hardly any business, other than maybe the medical field, where things are examined as closely and subject to as much scrutiny as ours is before they're actually put into practice. Perhaps we could find some time, and I'd be more than happy to show you or any other members of the committee just exactly how that process works, but it is very thorough.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and with that the hour is complete.

I thank our guests for being here today.

Just a heads-up for the committee. On Thursday we have witnesses appearing, and then we are looking at moving into clause-by-clause on Tuesday, March 10. So if you have amendments you're going to put forward, if we could get them to the clerk as late as Thursday evening, that gives us a chance to do the legal on the weekend.

All right. Everything's good. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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