

Airport closure talk called knee-jerk reaction

Owen Sound Sun Times

February 6, 2015

By Rob Gowan

Georgian Bluffs council is sending a letter to South Bruce Peninsula notifying them that the Wiarton-Keppel International Airport could close at the end of February.

The letter was drawn up after airport board chairman Dwight Burley explained to Georgian Bluffs council on Wednesday evening that he will have to close the airport if there isn't a manager in place by the end of February.

"We prepared a letter that is going out to South Bruce Peninsula today," Burley said early Thursday morning. "We are asking them to reconsider their decision on the motion to not extend the airport manager's contract, at least until we can sit down and talk to try to figure out what we can do to solve the problem."

On Tuesday, South Bruce Peninsula council rejected an airport board recommendation to extend the contract of interim airport manager Dan Vachon for six months at a monthly cost of \$11,600.

On Wednesday, Burley, who serves as accountable executive for the airport through his role as board chairman, said he would be forced to close the airport at the end of February when Vachon's current contract expires.

South Bruce Peninsula Mayor Janice Jackson called Burley's comments about closing the airport a "knee-jerk reaction," adding any decision about airport operations should be made by the airport board, not just the chairman.

"We are not all looking to close the airport, we are just looking at cutting back on our operating costs," Jackson said late Thursday afternoon. "What they have proposed is to extend the airport manager's contract at full load and we are not interested in doing that."

South Bruce Peninsula has proposed in its draft budget to cut its contribution to airport operations in half to about \$75,000 in 2015.

Georgian Bluffs has yet to finalize its budget for the airport. Each municipality contributed about \$150,000 last year.

Jackson said it is possible the airport could be operated at reduced hours and she wants the airport board to explore that option.

"We don't need to keep that airport open full-time when we have very little traffic out there," said Jackson. "We are just looking to scale back operations and that means the airport manager as well."

Burley has said it would be almost impossible to cut any more from the airport manager's contract, as it includes staff hired to perform other duties at the airport such as snow clearing, cleaning the administration building and some insurance costs.

Burley, who is also deputy-mayor of Georgian Bluffs, said he explained to his council on Wednesday evening the ramifications the municipalities would face if the airport was forced to close.

He said the air ambulance would no longer be able to land at the airport.

"They could possibly land in the snow, but there would be nobody there to fuel them up," said Burley. "How could a land ambulance get up to where the helicopter lands, because there would be no snow plowing."

Burley also said there are contracts the municipal owners must honour, including maintaining access for hangar owners and to a 24-hour weather office.

Burley said by extending the contract — which can be terminated with 30 days notice — it would give the councils time to look at its options for the airport. On Jan. 28, Georgian Bluffs and South Bruce Peninsula councils decided at a joint meeting to form a committee to explore options for the airport.

"Just extend the contract so the new committee we are forming can sit down and look at all the impacts of what we do," said Burley. "We need to sit down and talk about it and look at it, but we are just not there yet."

The future of the airport has been an issue for both municipalities since a 2013 Transport Canada inspection identified areas of concern, including a deteriorating runway and insufficient lighting.

Transport Canada required a corrective action plan (CAP) -- a guideline for how the board intends to continue to run the facility as a certified airport -- to be submitted. The CAP was approved by Transport Canada on Tuesday.

Jackson said she expects the airport board to come back to South Bruce Peninsula council with a proposal on how to operate the airport under the budget the municipality has proposed. She wants to see the board work with the airport manager to reduce the budget.

"To continue to just go down the same road is not going to work for my municipality," said Jackson.