

Transportation key to success

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— If it moves, it makes news in Clinton County. And rightly so.

The latest big news is that the essential air service contract is up for renewal in Plattsburgh and Lake Clear. While essential air service may not be very interesting on first blush, its implications are far reaching.

You see, this region is defined by the providence of location — not because we are the center of the world, but rather because we are smack between two historic First Cities — one in Canada and the other in the United States.

The importance of a location on a route for commerce can be best illustrated by looking just a little north. I recently extolled the economic development advantages of an interstate that could join Watertown to Plattsburgh and beyond, perhaps all the way through Vermont and New Hampshire to Northern Maine. This rooftop highway, dubbed by economic optimists as Interstate 98, would connect major towns in the North Country with each other, even as I-87 and I-81 connects the North Country to destinations north and south.

Some have said we already have a high-speed east-west corridor — called the 401 in Canada. Less than an hour's drive north of major towns in the North Country, this highway is a major artery connecting Canada east and west. As a consequence of the commerce that flows along this artery, the Canadian towns of Kingston, Cornwall, even Gananoque and Brockville, have grown quite nicely and diversely over the past two decades. Meanwhile, our U.S. towns of Gouverneur, Canton, Potsdam and Malone hold on for dear life.

As an example of the advantage of being on the corridor of commerce, rather than near the corridor, we need only look at the fortunes of towns along I-40 between Tennessee and North Carolina. A landslide has temporarily diverted traffic along an hour-long detour. This detour has all but created ghost towns in Hartford, Tenn., and Canton, N.C., along the closed highway, and has created a \$48 million windfall in Johnson City, a Tennessee town on the detour. Some of these communities have learned the lesson that merely being close to a corridor of commerce is not close enough.

Similarly, the fact that the 401 is not far from the North Country does nothing to spur North Country trade. So much of Plattsburgh's success and Watertown's success is because of their proximity on a major artery. Can we afford to deprive our northern sisters along Route 11 of a similar opportunity for economic diversity and success?

Of course, all change is displacing, and this infrastructure improvement will no doubt be met with its fair share of detractors. That is understandable. But, all will be forgotten when economic opportunity affords these towns an even greater opportunity to retain and repatriate their young folk to a region that has much to offer but high-quality jobs.

Plattsburgh's resurgence is also on the cusp of economic greatness. While it too would benefit from a better

connection to our North Country cousins, its next big thing is one of graduation, not transformation.

The hard work of our county legislators, PARC, The Development Corporation, the Chamber of Commerce and countless others like Mark Barie, Garry Douglas and (now Congressman) Bill Owens, who appreciated early on the Canadian connection, has allowed us to create a world-class airport to match world-class vistas. This vision took years to crystallize, and took a major step forward with the entry of routes to Florida and the Carolinas.

Notably missing was turboprop service to a major hub. That final piece of the puzzle may be just about in place.

Essential air service is a federal program that contracts with airlines to ensure air routes connect our regional centers. These networks permit access to the same high-quality access and mail service taken for granted in other communities. There are communities in Alaska that would simply have no scheduled air service or emergency options were it not for essential air service contracts.

While Plattsburgh does not have this kind of dependency on essential air service, it nonetheless may benefit in equally tangible ways. If the essential air services contract can be awarded to an airline that will bring larger planes to Plattsburgh International, we may be able to add one more connection to our already established list of transportation networks. For instance, Colgan Air would provide 33-seat passenger Saab 340B turboprops for a Plattsburgh-Boston route, and conceivably could someday connect Plattsburgh to its partner airline, Continental, through its Newark hub using 74 passenger Bombardier Q400 turboprops.

Then this region would be truly connected. The connectedness arises not because of our economic might. Rather, others recognize that we are in the right place at the right time. Canadians traveling from Montreal and its suburbs long to connect more conveniently and more affordably to destinations around the United States and around the world. As Garry Douglas accurately reminds us all at every opportunity, we can rightly be viewed as Montreal's U.S. suburb. And with a congressman in Bill Owens who appreciates economic development, jobs creation, the Canadian connection and the strategic advantage of our location, the stars may finally be aligned to complete this piece of the puzzle.

You may wonder just why an incremental improvement in our air connection can be so invaluable for our economic development. It is not so much that each of us would benefit from such an innovation. Rather, I see the true value would be to those not yet here or who don't live here. While we have ties to this region, those we must attract here to sew our bright economic future have no such ties yet. They will come here because they believe we are well connected to where they come from. And we are more likely to attract young professionals to Plattsburgh if we can fly them in to beautiful Plattsburgh International rather than have them drive down Cornelia Street off the Northway, past strip malls, utility poles and curb cuts.

Think about those first impressions for a moment. You may become as convinced as I am of the economic advantages that can flow to this community if we can establish just one high-quality connection to a major hub.

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