

Finger Lakes Visitors Connection
Position Paper on Canandaigua Airport Expansion
09/11/06

Tourism is often thought of as the hotels, the restaurants, the lakes, the recreational and entertainment venues, and the attractions. Certainly, in Ontario County, these establishments are “the organs” of our tourism community. And, for a tourism community to be healthy it must be surrounded and supported by other key industries: agriculture being a primary industry which complements tourism interest with great food, views, wines, and lifestyle. Agriculture helps give us our sense of place. Certainly, it helps us be recognized as a destination. And there are the visitors – all kinds of visitors come to our area. Some are here for meetings and conferences; some on business trips; others are vacationers, perhaps visiting friends and relatives. The visitors’ money (whether generated from business or leisure) helps feed our tourism destination and our economy. The more we feed it, the stronger we become. But, admittedly, the blood line to our destination is the transportation system which connects the visitors to “the organs”. While travel by automobile still remains our number one mode of transportation, visitors also arrive by motorcoach, motorcycle, train, boat and plane. Therefore, whenever an issue of transportation develops within our tourism destination, no matter which mode of transportation, it impacts tourism.

The Finger Lakes Visitors Connection Board has reviewed all of the issues presented on the expansion of the Canandaigua Airport. Although it is no expert on eminent domain or home rule, the consideration of those topics and their role in this project are important. The Board has also discussed the local and widespread impact on agriculture as well as the inconveniences that will be caused by the closure of Thomas Road. Where the position of FLVC adds importance to this issue is tourism. It is tourism where our analysis is focused. It is our responsibility to weigh-in on this issue. It is important that everyone put tourism in its context as “ultra-connected” to many issues in our area, from transportation to lake quality, to agricultural and historical preservation. This quote from a website for the USDA’s Office of Rural Development illustrates why we believe tourism is appropriately involved in transportation issues and why they are critical components to quality of life development. “Transportation plays a crucial role in the sustainable development of rural areas and small communities. Whether it’s the building and planning of pedestrian-oriented main streets in small towns to stimulate economic development, or the improvement of public transportation infrastructure to enhance the movement of goods and access to jobs, transportation literally binds a community together. (<http://ntl.bts.gov/ruraltransport/>) Of course, in this instance, our “Goods” are people.

In order for the Board of Directors of the Finger Lakes Visitors Connection (FLVC Board) to develop its position, it considered the following:

- Information presented by Town of Canandaigua Supervisor, Lloyd Kinnear;
- Information presented by representatives of the Industrial Development Agency of Ontario County, including Executive Director Mike Manikowski and IDA Board Chair, Chris Iversen;
- Letters and anecdotal information from residents and local business leaders who have experience with small airport aviation; experience traveling or hosting guests who travel

by private plane in and out of airports such as Canandaigua, Penn Yan, and Seneca Falls; Town residents, including Thomas Road residents, and individuals with knowledge or experience in the changing airline/transportation industry;

- Information gathered through an internet literature search using the terms: “small airport(s)”, “tourism economic development”, “business travel”, and “rural development and transportation”; and
- A review of articles and letters to the editor in the Daily Messenger regarding this current issue, and other organizations’ opinions and stance on the subject.

The Board of Directors of The Finger Lakes Visitors Connection consists of business leaders from across Ontario County who are all intimately involved in the tourism industry including lodging, retail sales, development, agriculture, recreation and entertainment. Its conclusion is that an expansion of the Canandaigua Airport would be positive for the growth of Ontario County’s tourism industry. This position was affirmed by a vote of the Board of Directors at a special meeting on September 7, 2006. The professional staff of Finger Lakes Visitors Connection provided the board with an overview on tourism/general aviation research as it related to airports in rural areas. The board heard from representatives of the IDA and the Town of Canandaigua. Board members also shared their personal and business experiences related to this topic. The Finger Lakes Visitors Connection board concludes:

- The airport expansion is aligned with the Finger Lakes Visitors Connection mission and vision - which speak to improving Ontario County as a destination for meetings and conferences and enhancing economic impact and quality of life for residents.
- There are a multitude of tourism related business opportunities which will come from an expanded airport. Retaining the status quo will result in a negative impact in our competitive position for future business.
- Since 9/11/2001 we continue to see adjustments by the traveling public, both leisure and business travelers, on how they choose to fly. The travelers’ decisions are increasingly being made on safety, security, and efficiency. General aviation airports are best positioned to seize the increased business – if their facilities are “big enough” and located in the right places.
- Tourism businesses would not be negatively impacted by the road closure, and that an expanded airport would not displace local culture through assimilation from overvisitation. The most negative aspect of the expansion, in our opinion, is the divisiveness surrounding the issue.
- An expanded airport would not be detrimental to Ontario County’s rural/agricultural sense of place.

Finger Lakes Visitors Connection (FLVC) acknowledges that the expansion will cause some inconvenience. We have heard from residents who will be inconvenienced. Some are opposed to the expansion. Some, however, are in favor of the project in spite of the inconvenience and believe that the greater good will be served by the expansion. There are many issues to be solved before the airport can be expanded and Finger Lakes Visitors Connection encourages both parties to negotiate a win-win solution.

The tourism connections to this issue are many and varied. Following are our comments on each of the five key tourism related issues. Please note that these comments do not represent an exhaustive review of the literature, nor complete notations of the discussion. They are provided for background information and as a reflection of the primary discussion points among the board as they molded the tourism industry's position on this topic.

1. How will an expansion of the airport affect Ontario County's "sense of place"? Can we still position ourselves as rural and maintain our agricultural based lifestyle?

It is our understanding that 75 acres of farmland are needed to complete the expansion. It is also our understanding that farming and aviation commonly coexist in many other airports, and in fact are encouraged as compatible uses by the Federal Aviation Administration. Again, FLVC acknowledges the importance of agriculture in our region and as an element of tourism. Agriculture supplies food to our visitors. Tourism and agriculture have a symbiotic relationship. Our visitors provide additional markets to local farmers, evidenced by such programs as the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty, the area's Farmers' Markets, roadside stands, and direct outlets, such as the New York City Green Market. Additionally, our area's tremendous farmland vistas are the backdrop for many photographs taken home by our visitors as memories. Tourism wants to retain both the products and the vistas provided by our thriving agricultural industry.

We do not believe that the expansion of the airport will lead to the demise of products for our visitors or residents. Nor do we believe that this expansion violates our current board policy on protection of the viewsheds. Finally, our research reinforced our opinion that "rural" and "airport" can coexist. In fact, some of our most rural places in this country run airports of similar or larger sizes. Undoubtedly, when most people think of Penn Yan and Yates County, they think "rural" – yet the Penn Yan airport is larger than Canandaigua's. The rural nature of our county will not be lost by this expansion.

2. What are the negative impacts of an expanded airport for tourism?

Common concerns with any tourism development relate to traffic, access, and the possibility of displacement of local culture by overvisitation and assimilation. We do not believe that closing this road will cause traffic jams or other access issues. The expansion of the airport will enhance our transportation system, providing more alternatives for residents, visitors and business people to fly from the Canandaigua Airport and not travel on Rt. 332 north to the Thruway to reach the regional airports in Rochester or Syracuse.

Ease of access generally results in more visitation to an area. We see an opportunity to capitalize on more visitation by increasing these additional visitor touchpoints. A properly planned and well utilized airport facility and transportation system offer opportunities to present and retain our region's distinctive appeal.

3. What will an expansion of the airport offer as opportunities for travelers to access our destination?

Oftentimes residents do not recognize the depth of the tourism industry within their community. Travelers are "tricky" to spot, since they do not wear buttons, T-shirts, or signs that say "I am a visitor". Most just blend into our community during their visits and quietly leave in many different directions. However, the visitors arrive and travel here in many forms and for many reasons. These are some of the opportunities which could be seized for tourism and tourism related industries with a

more promotion of an expanded airport. While these examples are drawn from Iowa, the similarities are close enough to make a parallel comparison.

- Transport Business People (Meetings, Events, Conferences, other company locations)
- Customer visits
- Economic Development
- Potential development of aviation careers
- News gathering and airborne news
- Aerial photography
- Aerial mapping
- Wildlife Counts
- Visits by politicians
- Personal travel
- Recreation visitation
- Aircraft rental
- Flightseeing and airplane rides
- Fly-ins and airshows
- Youth camps

(Reference: “Your Local Airport” brochure published by the Office of Aviation, Ames, Iowa and found on iawings.com) Many of these same opportunities were cited in the IDA literature and discussion. Again, we believe if the opportunities exist and work in Ames, Iowa, they will here too. If we are losing business to small airports like Penn Yan and Seneca Falls, then we have opportunity lost. This leads to Part B of our third question.

3 b. Could the lack of an expansion impede access to our area and therefore our competitiveness in the future tourism?

There is no doubt that tourism will continue to grow if the airport is not expanded. However, the economic and social benefits will be received faster and will be greater if the airport is expanded. Historical analogies and trend information since 9/11/2001 lead us to conclude that to not expand will leave opportunity on the table.

Greg Principato, Airport Council International, November 2005 noted in his speech on the importance of air transportation to our industry,

“The purpose of transportation is the movement of people and products to destinations and markets wherever in the world they may exist. If you can move people and products, you can compete, if you can’t move people and products efficiently and safely, you cannot compete. It’s that simple. Throughout history, great economies have been built on the most efficient transportation system of the day. Once it was Clipper Ships sailing the high seas. Today it is air transportation – the safest, most efficient and most effective means of transportation ever devised. Air transportation is key to enhancing our quality of life and promoting tourism and trade.”

While Clipper Ships never sailed our lakes, steamboats did and they were the primary vehicle for moving products and people. Changes in transportation have always impacted local economies. There are lessons to be learned from the development of “transportation” and the ensuing vitality of the connected towns. From stagecoach routes to steamboats to canal towns to railroad towns to Thruway placement, as transportation systems have evolved, so have those towns that are most directly connected – or not. Their evolution has depended on the adoption and integration of the

“latest” transportation system. Air transportation is not a fad. It is here to stay – and since 9/11, it is changing such that smaller, locally based general aviation airports are growing to accommodate travelers’ need for efficiency and security.

Principato provides numbers with his endorsements of aviation transport. Community leaders can seize this trend or can deny that we should be part of it. Finger Lakes Visitors Connection believes we should make the enhancements in our infrastructure which will allow us to capitalize on these trends. Opportunities exist for tourism, economic development, for improving the quality of life for our residents and the long term viability of our community.

Principato’s numbers illustrate the growth in people traveling by air in the United States since 1993.

1993 – 466 million people

1997 – 600 million

2005 - 717.5 million expected to board a plane

Although most air travel is through commercial airports, the Iowa Wings brochure puts the numbers in perspective by noting that “nationally, general aviation aircraft make up 96 percent of the entire U.S. civilian aircraft fleet and 75 percent of all U.S. flights.” (Ref: iawings.com) We must capitalize on this opportunity.

4. How does an airport expansion fit into our mission and our vision for Ontario County’s tourism industry?

The mission of Finger Lakes Visitors Connection is to “create visitorship and economic vitality by marketing and developing the assets of Ontario County as a premier leisure and meetings destination.”

Our goal is to ensure that Ontario County is positioned as a premier location for meetings and conferences. We recognize that a contemporary, efficient transportation system is critical to achieving that goal. With today’s security measures and crowding at commercial airports, it is faster, and many businesses see it as more economical, to charter an airplane from a general aviation airport. Finger Lakes Visitors Connections wants to be at the forefront of this revolution. During our board discussion, stories were shared about our current fly-in visitors and board members’ experiences with flying in to general aviation airports. Many market opportunities were identified: professional meeting groups, developers, wine related gatherings, golfers, and leisure travelers for weddings, reunions and visiting friends and relatives. These were not isolated experiences, but we know that more and more businesses and people are placing a premium on time. Tighter security “has done more than just frustrate passengers. It has also brought an influx of new business to companies that try to minimize the stress on fliers... in hope of avoiding long delays and luggage restrictions ...” (Small businesses score with hassle-free travel – *CNN Money*) Ontario County’s tourism industry would like to see this kind of traveler more frequently and not lose them or their economic impact to other destinations (with larger airports) within or outside of the Finger Lakes. An airport expansion will encourage this type of visitation and ultimately create recognition of our area for its business assets, leisure appeal, sense of place and quality of life. Some of the anecdotal evidence examined reinforced the positive impacts that an expansion will have.

Principato concluded his speech last November by noting that “Tourism not only brings the direct benefits of spending by visitors, it is an important tool for marketing a nation or region as a good place to do business and as a good place to live. Tourism shows a nation or region that is

proud of itself and of what it has to offer.” Similarly, our vision for tourism in Ontario County is that “Tourism is recognized as an industry that contributes to the economic prosperity of Ontario County by infusing new dollars into our communities, enhancing the quality of life for residents, and promoting the natural beauty of our county.” With Ontario County’s recognition by *Progressive Farmer* as the #1 rural county in the United States, we have much of which to be proud. It is the same assets that visitors cite as impressive when visiting our area that also make the Finger Lakes and Ontario County a great place to live. We encourage all our residents to share in this pride and join us in touting the reasons this is a great place to visit and to live.

Finger Lakes Visitors Connection has spent considerable time and effort analyzing this matter. We recognize that this is a divisive issue, and therefore, our statement of this position is not taken lightly. We have attempted to look at all sides. Our position is driven by our area of expertise and aligned with our mission and vision. The expansion of the airport will encourage visitorship and economic vitality through tourism for Ontario County. It will enhance our ability to market Ontario County as a premier leisure and meeting destination. The expansion of the Canandaigua Airport will contribute to the economic prosperity of Ontario County, infuse new dollars into our communities, and enhance our quality of life. Finger Lakes Visitors Connection encourages the expansion of the Canandaigua Airport.

Position Statement Prepared by:

Edward C. “Russ” Kenyon
Chairperson
Finger Lakes Visitors Connection

Valerie Knoblauch
President
Finger Lakes Visitors Connection

4/13/2007

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