

Airship base for Ponoka?

By HARLEY RICHARDS; Advocate business editor

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PONOKA — Within a few years this town could become an aerial gateway to Northern Alberta and a departure point for tourists seeking a bird's-eye view of the Rocky Mountains.

At least that's the vision of Michelle Stirling, a member of Ponoka's economic development committee and liaison for U.K.-based World SkyCat Limited.

World SkyCat manufactures "hybrid air vehicles" — helium-filled airships capable of carrying 20 or more tons of cargo and travelling at speeds of about 100 km/h. And the company is considering the Ponoka airport as a potential base of operations.

Stirling, who operates Ponoka Employment Services for Alberta Human Resources and Employment, thinks the Central Alberta town would be an ideal place for the airship company to operate.

With its highway and railway connections, Ponoka could serve as a staging point for shipments of equipment and other materials headed for Northern Alberta, she said.

"You can fly it in on a plane and it'll get there at great expense, or you can put it on a SkyCat and it'll get there a little slower but it'll get there a lot cheaper."

Stirling also thinks a World SkyCat airship operating out of Ponoka would prove popular with passengers.

"Just imagine floating on a skyship like this alongside the Rocky Mountains. It would be a fantastic tourism thing."

The Alberta government has identified the aerospace industry as a growth sector, said Stirling. Her committee decided to look at ways of developing Ponoka Industrial Airport — Labrie Field, which in turn led Stirling to World SkyCat.

As it turned out, the European company was looking at Western Canada.

"This is one of the few places in the world where there's a combination of need and money to make it happen," said Stirling, noting that Europe has a well-established transportation and shipping system that would be tough to crack.

In addition to Ponoka's transportation links and proximity to the booming north, World SkyCat was interested in the fact that the local airport is one of only a handful in Alberta offering CanPass service. Travellers with a CanPass permit — such as those who frequently cross the Canada-U.S border — are pre-screened and can bypass normal customs and immigration procedures.

Stirling said a SkyCat airship could use other smaller airports, in addition to Ponoka's.

"If you look at Alberta, and actually most of Western Canada, there are dozens of rural airports that are off the main flight path, but they are adjacent to or in proximity to major centres."

Currently, said Stirling, World SkyCat is looking for North American partners like aviation and transport companies to help it develop this market.

She speculated that it could be two to five years before airships are operating here.

If the company does choose Ponoka as one of its places of operation, Stirling foresees economic opportunities for the town.

"I think there'd be very big spin-offs," she said, adding that few infrastructure changes at the airport would be required.

Ponoka town council has pledged its support of the initiative, as has the airport committee.