

New equipment will improve operations at Nanaimo Airport

ROBERT BARRON DAILY NEWS

Starting tomorrow, travel to and from the Nanaimo Airport will get much more reliable when new state-of-the-art instrument landing systems and high-intensity lighting are turned on.

The long-anticipated milestone signals the completion of the \$16.4-million phase one of the facility's expansion plans, which also includes extending the length of the runway by about one-fifth (480 metres) to allow larger planes to land.

Ironically, Tuesday's press conference to announce that the airport's new systems are about to become operational came on the same day that all of the Cassidy facility's six scheduled passenger flights to Vancouver airport were expected to be cancelled due to inclement weather conditions.

Dozens of passengers, many scheduled to make connecting flights in Vancouver to head home for Christmas, were forced to make alternate arrangements after they arrived at the airport Tuesday morning to discover their flights were cancelled.

It's been a common problem for Nanaimo travellers. Although about 153,000 passengers a year pass through the terminal, the facility has had a reliability rate of just 85% between November and February.

Mike Hooper, the airport's president and CEO, said the new systems are ready to go and Tuesday's flight problems would likely have been averted had they been approved for use.

"Tuesday's flight cancellations underscore the importance of the new systems," Hooper said.

"We tried them out on Monday and a flight that was coming in managed to land in almost the same weather conditions we experienced on Tuesday."

Like many others, Randy Coupar, a student at Vancouver Island University, was left stranded at the airport Tuesday morning when his scheduled 9:30 a.m. flight to Vancouver was cancelled, causing him to miss his connecting flight to Haida Gwaii.

He hopes for better luck today.

"If the new systems mean people won't get stuck in Nanaimo anymore, then the money spent will be well worth it," he said.

Phase 2 of the airport expansion, which will see the terminal and parking lot enlarged, should be completed by March 2011.

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