

# **MEMBER REQUEST FOR DECISION**

## **SPRING MUNICIPAL LEADERS' CAUCUS**

**DATE:**

March 30 and 31, 2023

**TOPIC:**

Lack of Consultation Between Alberta Health Services, the Provincial Government, and Municipalities

**RECOMMENDATION:**

1. The Council from the Town of Ponoka requests that the Alberta Municipalities Board advocate for municipalities across the province to be included in the decision-making process when it comes to health care issues concerning their communities, which currently are being made almost exclusively and unilaterally by Alberta Health Services and the provincial government;
2. And further, that Council from the Town of Ponoka requests that the Alberta Municipalities advocate for the provincial government to ensure funding is made available to airports that currently find themselves in the position of needing upgrades to comply with both new Alberta Health Services and provincial standards, and to commit to providing funding to other airports who may find themselves in a similar situation in the very near future.

**BACKGROUND:**

Early in November 2022, with no advance notice or consultation with the municipality, Alberta Health Services placed the Ponoka Airport on a no-fly winter status. This restriction meant that air ambulance/medivac flights were prohibited from landing at the Ponoka Airport. Three weeks later on November 22, 2022, Alberta Health Services notified Ponoka Town Council of fixed wing safety concerns at the airport, and advised that patients requiring fixed wing air ambulances would be transported through the Wetaskiwin Airport and then be transported by ground ambulance to the destination facility.

Following these events, meetings were arranged with representation from MLA Ron Orr (Lacombe/Ponoka); MLA R. J. Sigurdson (Parliamentary Secretary for EMS Reform), Alberta Health Services, EMS/Air Ambulance Authority, Ponoka County and the Town of Ponoka, where information was shared after the fact.

At these meetings information was shared regarding the varying degrees of experience of pilots and that a risk assessment was conducted which identified hazards on landing the King Aircraft on the existing runway, which is at the minimum length, during winter conditions. It was also identified that in order to achieve full operation, the airport in the future would require an extension to the runway to achieve compliance with operational standards. Funding implications associated with an extension to the runway were also discussed

and it was suggested that Ponoka along with other municipalities lobby the government to ensure funding be made available.

In researching other airports across the province, it was noted that several other airport runways are of similar size and may become subject to the same restrictions imposed on Ponoka. Similarly, we have been informed of airport closures in Two Hills and Spirit River, with the same lack of consultation on behalf of the provincial bodies, whose decisions ultimately impact resources and residents at the local level.

Ponoka's circumstances are unique in that we have the Centennial Centre for Mental Health and Brain Injury, a 330-bed hospital, which serves residents from across Alberta and even some from out of province, as well as the Ponoka Hospital and Care Centre which no longer has a functioning Helipad. Both of these care facilities rely on the air ambulance operations coming into Ponoka, and represent 400 beds.

Additionally, while the Centennial Centre for Mental Health and Brain Injury serves the entire province, the Ponoka Hospital and Care Centre serves a catchment area of nearly 50,000 people, which is comprised of the Town of Ponoka, Ponoka County and Maskwacis residents. To that end, the Emergency Department at the Ponoka Hospital and Care Centre sees on average 70 patients in a 24-hour period.

One only wonders had Ponoka been involved in the consultation and decision-making process regarding the suspension of medivac flights to Ponoka, would the outcomes have been different.

The impacts of this decision include:

- Unknown effects on patients requiring transport. 101 medivac flights came into Ponoka in 2022 delivering 87 patients to the Centennial Centre for Mental Health and Brain Injury. As a designated provincial mental health facility, air ambulance services are paramount in ensuring that patients have access to the mental health services they need in a timely and least invasive manner. It is common practice that patients from across the province receive treatment at this facility, as these specialized services are not available in many municipalities.
- Placing additional stress and workload on an already over-taxed ground ambulance service as these patients have to be transported by ground ambulance from Wetaskiwin which is 39 km away and adds 78 km for a round trip, with at least another hour in travel time.

While we are using our own experience in Ponoka as an example, we understand that lack of proactive, and transparent communication on healthcare decisions with a direct impact on local communities is an issue faced by municipalities across Alberta.

Support of this issue from the Alberta Municipalities will raise an awareness of the importance of reaching out to those closest to the source and inviting them to participate in the decision-making process.

**ENCLOSURES:**

None