

Portage celebrates \$2.3-billion flight training deal

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By Gabrielle Giroday

RESIDENTS of Portage la Prairie are celebrating a multi-billion-dollar flight-training contract expected to inject new life into a community suffering from recent downturns in the agricultural economy.

The \$2.3-billion contract awarded to Allied Wings, which insiders predict will be formally announced in the next few weeks, will include an estimated \$200-million facelift to the Portage flight-training centre and at least 180 new jobs.

The contract is part of National Defence's plans to greatly expand its operation on the old Portage air force base, which provides military flight training for pilots from foreign countries on both single and multi-engine planes as well as helicopters.

After months of waiting to hear whether Bombardier or Allied Wings would nail the winning bid, local business and political leaders are relieved that a decision on the contract has finally been made.

"Everyone's particularly pleased after the long delays in announcing the contract, because it's been much longer than originally projected," said Brian Pallister, MP for Portage-Lisgar. "It was supposed to be announced last fall, and when it wasn't, alarm bells started sounding off."

For some residents, the good news couldn't come soon enough. The centre is expected to contribute \$50 million annually to a Portage economy that's been experiencing hard times.

"If you look at the research, you can see the potato industry is not at the top of its game in the last few years," said Chris Dyer, president of Portage la Prairie's chamber of commerce. "We also have some local cattle producers that have been hurt (by the mad cow crisis), and our town's seen a couple of major retail outlets close in the last while."

Portage la Prairie is home to two major factories for french fry processing, a 26-year-old McCain plant as well as a two-year-old Simplot plant that employ hundreds of local citizens.

The new centre will bring in valuable jobs and funds into a city with a population of 13,000, and community leaders hope the 20-year contract, which comes with heavy capital investments, will secure Portage la Prairie's reputation as a spot that's taking flight -- literally. The flight centre will be in Southport, three kilometres from the centre of the city.

"We're absolutely delighted a decision has been made," said David Faurshou, MLA for Portage La Prairie. "The spin-offs of the contract will add a lot of diversity to our local economy."