

**Subject: Floatplane Festival****APPROVALS:****Annette Antoniak**\_\_\_\_\_  
Director\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Administrative Officer**Recommended Motion:**

THAT the Floatplane Festival report be accepted as information; and

THAT Administration continue working with community partners to explore the feasibility of a floatplane festival and report back to Council in the first quarter of 2020 with further information on such an event, including, but not limited to, budgetary costs and timelines for an event.

**Summary:**

During the 2020 budget deliberations, Mayor Scott requested Administration explore the concept of a floatplane festival on the Snye River.

**Background:**

The waterways in the Wood Buffalo region have a long history of floatplane aviation. With its calm water and relatively straight shoreline, the Snye River was considered an ideal location for the landing and docking of floatplanes. The first recorded plane to land on the river was a Vicker's Vidette in 1923. By 1932 Fort McMurray had become the busiest water-based airport in Canada.

Pilots, such as C.H. "Punch" Dickins and Wilfred "Wop" Reid May, were considered local heroes as they transported mail and medical supplies to isolated outposts in the north, often risking their lives in extreme weather conditions to help others in need.

In 1966, with the construction of a causeway connecting downtown Fort McMurray with MacDonald Island Park, floatplane traffic began to experience a steady decline. However, the role that floatplanes played in the history of the region has not been forgotten and recently a plaque celebrating the contribution of C.H. "Punch" Dickins was installed by Parks Canada, along the banks of the Snye River.

Regardless of the decline in use, floatplanes are still an active mode of transportation across the country, particularly in the north. To celebrate this much needed lifeline,

there are numerous floatplane festivals or “fly ins” which are hosted in various parts of North America. These events typically attract floatplane operators from across the continent and usually involve activities for both the visiting pilots and local festival attendees in the form of entertainment, tours, meet and greets, opportunities to showcase the planes, fly-pasts etc.

Although the RMWB has not hosted a festival specifically for floatplanes, we have participated in, and hosted, other non-floatplane events, such as the 2008 Mackenzie River Challenge, and the 2014 Fort McMurray International Air Show. Other floatplane festivals that take place in North America include: The Midnight Sun Fly-In in Yellowknife, NWT, the Norseman Festival in Red Lake, ON, and the International Seaplane Fly-In in Greenville, Maine.

These festivals are generally organized by local committees with municipal funding providing financial support, as well as funding through industry, business sponsors and gift-in-kind arrangements. There may be opportunities to partner with existing festivals and/or other floatplane communities. We have identified potential partners for this event such as Indigenous groups, local heritage and historical groups, Fort McMurray Airport Authority, Fort McMurray Flying Club, Parks Canada and Nav Canada. The event would require close cooperation with the Fort McMurray Flying Club, which operates the Snye aerodrome.

The Wood Buffalo Economic Development Corporation (WBEDC) have expressed interest in being involved in an event like this. RMWB Staff met with Executive Director of Tourism, Michael Sieger, who identified a floatplane festival as an excellent tourism opportunity. The initiative fits into the group’s goal of developing new sustainable year round festivals and growing those that are already in place. Working with various community partners, Tourism saw this as a viable project and along with the WBEDC, shared that they are in a position and are open to taking a lead role in getting this festival idea off the ground.

**Budget/Financial Implications:**

Should Council wish to proceed with this concept, a detailed budget evaluation can be developed for approval and adoption. This budget will take into consideration requirements for a festival of this nature, which would require unique infrastructure to support the docking, landing and departure of aircraft. This infrastructure would include mooring/docking for the aircraft, fuel provision, on site security, and local transport options for visiting pilots. At this time, it is too early to estimate the cost of an event like this.

**Rationale for Recommendation:**

This event falls within two of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo 2018-2021 Strategic Plan initiatives. The first being Strategy & Initiative #2e, Riverfront Master Planning and Revitalization, which directs the Municipality to “create opportunities for small business development, arts, culture and recreation.” The second being Strategy &

Initiative #3f, Support Arts and Culture. The goal of this initiative is to “host and attract major multi-sport and cultural events that support arts and culture development, contribute to increased tourism and generate prosperity for the region along with improved reputation and branding”.

The benefits of hosting a floatplane festival include:

- Creating new partnerships with the Aviation community.
- Celebrating the region’s rich history of transportation and the work that went into delivering the necessities of living in a Northern community.
- Bringing more events and tourists to the downtown area of Fort McMurray.
- Offering the people of Wood Buffalo a new and exciting festival to participate in and enjoy.
- A chance to teach visitors and locals about the role that C.H. “Punch” Dickins played in the economic and social growth of Fort McMurray.
- Introducing a new, potentially international, audience to Fort McMurray.
- Collaborating with Indigenous partners to demonstrate the important roles that floatplanes, and the Snye River play in Northern living today.
- Demonstrating the region’s warm hospitality and giving visitors an example of what to expect during the 2022 Arctic Winter Games.

**Strategic Priorities:**

Downtown Revitalization  
Regional Economic Development  
Rural and Indigenous Communities and Partnerships