



Airport Feature – by Steve Creedy

Double Airline Blow Turns into Twin Successes for Narrabri

The collapse of Brindabella Airlines in late 2013 and the similar fate suffered six months later by replacement Vincent Aviation was a double blow for the NSW regional town of Narrabri.

QantasLink, which offered relief fares from nearby Moree after the Vincent insolvency, made it clear it did not intend to fly to Narrabri and the town was left without a regular public transport (RPT) service.

Fast forward three years and a major turnaround will shortly see the farming and mining town connected by direct flights to two capital cities thanks to relatively new RPT operator Fly Corporate. Narrabri already boasts a weekday service to Brisbane and from September 13 Narrabri Shire's 14,000 residents will no longer need to make the 520km drive to Sydney.

The connection to the capitals is the result of some strategic planning by the Narrabri Shire Council and the launch into RPT services two years ago by Fly Corporate's Canberra-based parent, Corporate Air.

Corporate Air has been operating charters since 1972 and began flying scheduled services as result of the resources slowdown.

It is using its fleet of 34-seat Saab 340B Plus and 18-seat Metroliner turboprop aircraft to connect regional communities with Brisbane, Sydney and, from October, Melbourne.

Fly Corporate began servicing Narrabri in August 2016, with a triangular service that included Moree.

Strong demand from Narrabri regularly saw the service upgraded from a Metroliner to a Saab and when scarce regional slots became available in Sydney, the airline decided to give Narrabri its sought-after route.

The change means that, from September 13, Inverell will be linked with Moree and a second service will operate as Brisbane-Narrabri-Sydney and return from Monday to Friday.

The twin connection is a situation that will be the envy of many towns and came after 12 months of sustained negotiations involving Narrabri council staff and general manager Stewart Todd.

The Brisbane flights have already been good news for business people, it means health services can more easily bring specialists into the region and Todd believes there is potential in terms of tourism.

He said the original approach to Fly Corporate had been for a Sydney service but when this was unsuccessful, the council accepted an alternative offer involving Brisbane and Moree.

He said the strong patronage by Narrabri residents had been backed by a council strategy to promote the facilities and attractions of Brisbane to Sydney-centric locals.

A good relationship with the airline “based on honesty and trust” had also allowed Fly Corporate’s management to build confidence in the market.

“We met them regularly, talking about the service, about what we could improve and providing feedback from back on the ground here,” he said. “Based on the relationship we’d built, we started asking about Sydney.”

“They’re not silly, they know the numbers we had previously when we had the Sydney service.”

“They’ve also seen the numbers increase in both Moree and Tamworth when we’ve had no service and people go to those ports.”

While the council provided some incentives to attract Fly Corporate, Todd believes the good relationship and a shared understanding of mutual benefits were major factors in the Brisbane and Sydney decisions.

“It was a happy negotiation all the way through,” he said. “It was just a good, honest negotiation where everyone saw the benefits for everyone else. We came to a mutual agreement that the incentives were appropriate.”

Also important, according to Todd, was a strategic decision prior more than three years ago to spend \$10.5 million upgrading the airport.

That included strengthening and lengthening the runway, as well as new aprons. It was funded by a combination of Voluntary Planning Agreement money through one of the local mines, grants and a small loan taken out by the council.

“The council was strategic and, I suppose, took a reasonable risk in that we had no RPT at that point in time,” Todd said. “The runway was dilapidated and we were just fortunate that we had access to a couple of funding streams that enabled us to do that.”

Fly Corporate sales manager Geoff Woodham said the Brisbane service exceeded expectations.

“The Brisbane-Narrabri service has been supported incredibly well, far surpassing what we ever expected and the next logical step was introducing the Sydney service,” he said, noting that potential projects such as the Santos gas project and the Narrabri South Solar Farm would be “a perfect fit” for the new route.”

The regional airline is continuing to expand, adding Orange-Brisbane to its network shortly after the Brisbane-Narrabri-Sydney and Brisbane-Inverell-Moree flights as well as an Orange-Melbourne service from October 9.

For its part, the Narrabri council is now getting kudos from the people who once criticised it for investing money in the airport.

“A good, sound strategic decision was made three and half years ago and you can see the fruits of that today,” Todd said.

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