

## CASE FOR A MUNICIPAL AIRSTRIP ON NORTH HAVEN

### BACKGROUND:

Residents of, and visitors to, North Haven are served by a single air carrier, Penobscot Island Air (PIA), headquartered in Owls Head at the Knox County Airport. PIA has access to two privately owned airstrips on North Haven.

**NORFAM/WATSON AIRSTRIP:** PIA and the Town of North Haven both have formal agreements with Norfam Corporation which owns the airstrip informally referred to as the Watson airstrip. PIA has access to the Watson airstrip only from September 30 through May 14. The newest version of the agreement between the Town and Norfam was negotiated in 2016 and requires the Town to pay for the airstrip's owners' liability insurance (\$4,568 annually), an additional liability policy for the Town (\$3,175 annually), and snow plowing (\$1,440 for the winter of 2016-17, the most recent season for which the Town has been billed). Among other stipulations, the agreement describes the limits on the number of flights on a weekly and daily basis. The exception is for emergency medical evacuations, which are permitted regardless of the foregoing limits. We have not seen the parallel Norfam/PIA two-party agreement.

**WITHERSPOON AIRSTRIP:** The Town is not a party to any formal agreement with either PIA or the owner of the second airstrip, Witherspoon Landing Strip, Inc., informally known as Witherspoon's. Despite the absence of formal agreements, the Town has partially subsidized the cost of the warning lights on Pulpit Harbor Road and also worked to obtain partial funding from the MDOT for surface repairs to the airstrip. There are no restrictions on the number of landings.

**BOTH AIRSTRIPS:** PIA is the only entity (other than the owners) permitted to use the airstrips.

### LIMITATIONS:

Although many of the heaviest restrictions on the use of the Watson airstrip were relaxed when the 2016 Agreement replaced the 1993 Agreement, the number of weeks when the strip was available to PIA was reduced when the off-limits "summer season" was extended.

The most significant limitations affecting the Town's and PIA's current arrangements are the length of the Witherspoon strip (950') and its relation and proximity to Pulpit Harbor

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Road. Three of the four busiest months of air traffic occur in the summer. The short length of the Witherspoon strip limits PIA's use of equipment to the smallest of its aircraft, the Cessna 206. The Watson strip is 3,000' (although only 2,400' is usable) which allows PIA to use its Cessna 207s and a 208 Caravan (in the event that PIA were to lease one).

Weather conditions, coupled with wind direction, dictate the actual number of passengers or the amount of freight the 206 can transport when only the Witherspoon strip is available. Although it has seating for five passengers, PIA's 206s can often transport only two passengers, and occasionally only one under adverse wind/weather conditions. Since annual passenger demand has grown by 31% between 2010 and 2017 (and annual landings by 36% from 2,200 to 3,000) the dependence on the 206s is highly inefficient from PIA's perspective and has a direct impact on the nuisance noise factor as well as the safety of passengers, crew and the occupants of vehicles on Pulpit Harbor Road. The 206 has a greater "noise signature" than the 207s and 208s. Its passenger/freight weight limitations increase the number of landings and takeoffs to carry the same tonnage when wind and weather restrict the aircraft's carrying capacity. The short length of the airstrip coupled with wind direction also dictates whether aircraft land from the SW coming in low over Pulpit Harbor Road or from the NE and taxiing down the landing strip from a touch-down much further from traffic.

#### THE TOWN'S PERSPECTIVE:

With the greatest volume of passenger and freight traffic concentrated in the busiest season of the year and requiring passage and delivery on the shorter of two airstrips with a resultant increase in landings and safety risks associated with traffic on Pulpit Harbor Road, the case for an alternate municipally owned airstrip becomes compelling.

The growth in air traffic has been described above. Over the same period, PIA has seen its package business grow by 51% from 12,720 packages annually to 19,200 annually. All sectors of the North Haven economy have become reliant on PIA's freight service and PIA's economically viability depends on access to all of the island markets it serves in the Midcoast. PIA cannot lose access to North Haven and continue to operate. On the other side, island businesses as well as seasonal and year round residents have all come to depend on the PIA link between them and, for instance, both local and online shippers, including Amazon for parts, inventory and consumer goods not available on the island.

The Town of North Haven has a history of strenuously defending its stakeholder rights and needs with the other critical link to the outside world, namely the Maine State Ferry

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Service. An opportunity appears to be coming into view which would allow it to protect its increasingly vital access to air service by direct ownership of a new airstrip.

**OPPORTUNITY:**

Town officials have learned that a landowner who had cleared 2,500' on the south shore of the island may be interested in making the site available to the Town of North Haven on terms which have not yet been discussed. Whether the current owner or the Town would undertake the expense of making this partially developed airstrip useable remains to be negotiated. At this writing, should the Town obtain ownership of the site, it is considering modeling the arrangement which Vinalhaven has with the airstrip it owns and which PIA uses for their exclusive mutual benefit. PIA leases the VH airstrip for \$1 annually. The Town is responsible for physical maintenance, including plowing.

An opportunity which allows the Town to control the vital air transportation link needs to be pursued vigorously.

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