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**Council working towards regular scheduled flights with Thunder Bay airline**

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# Council working towards regular scheduled flights with Thunder Bay airline

© 13 May 2026

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A report for an agreement between the Town of Fort Frances and North Star Air of Thunder Bay, Ont., to build a successful flight schedule with contributions from the town was carried during Monday's town council meeting, with no members opposed.

At the beginning of 2026, the town administration began working with the airline to re-establish scheduled passenger service at the Fort Frances

Municipal Airport. The agreement discussed at Monday's meeting aims to work out a framework that balances financial capabilities and meets the needs of the community.

After discussing the plan with Tom Meilleur, the airline's vice president, Fort Frances Mayor Andrew Hallikas said he believes the partnership will work well.

"I've had several conversations with Tom at North Star Air," Hallikas said. "He views Fort Frances as a partner. He's willing to tailor the service to our needs. He's willing to use larger or smaller aircraft if needed. He's willing to cancel flights if nobody's on those flights. He wants it to be a success as much as we want it to be a success. I think this is a real opportunity for Fort Frances, putting us squarely into the future. So, I'm 100 per cent supportive of this."

Attached to the report was a slate of proposed fare rates. After HST, fuel surcharges and navigation fees, tickets prices are listed starting at \$450 for a "saver" ticket, which requires booking at least seven days in advance. The next step up is a "thrif" ticket, priced at \$550, which is the same as the Saver option, aside from needing to be booked only three days prior. Neither of these options is refundable after purchase, and there is an additional \$50 fee for any changes or cancellations.

There is also the option for a "Flex" ticket, priced at \$799. This option can be booked anytime, has refundability options and can be changed or cancelled without an additional fee.

For the revenue agreement to work, the town will need to move money from the corporate Reserve Fund into a newly established Airport Contingency Reserve Fund designed to help mitigate shortfalls in the airline's profits during the two-year contract.

The town would be reallocating \$500,000 towards this fund, with estimates that the airline will fall short by \$171,000 during its first year. This is expected to decrease in the second year of the contract as service is established and passengers use the airline to travel to and from Fort Frances more regularly. It should be noted that the actual amount of the shortfall is largely unpredictable, since it depends entirely on how much the public is making use of the air service.

"It's tough to get an airline to take on all the risks in small communities like us, so basically we have a pot of money to mitigate the costs until it gets to a point where it's operational at a profit," Chief Administrative Officer Marcel Michaels told The Times. "If we start hemorrhaging, we have an exit clause immediately, we can get out. Let's say if nobody

bought any tickets for a month, we'd probably close it down if we're starting to lose a lot of money.”

Both North Star Air and the Town of Fort Frances plan to heavily advertise the new service. For the town's part, this would include dedicating \$40,000 towards marketing efforts for 2026. Infrastructure and Growth Manager Travis Rob said they will be looking to concentrate marketing efforts in areas that often inquire about air service to the town.

“I envision utilizing the global expertise of a number of our staff in terms of where best to market,” Rob said. “For example, the guys at the airport get calls all the time for ‘How do we get to Fort Frances?’ They're really good about getting some background information about where people are calling from, so they do have a bit of a running history of where people are trying to travel from to get to Fort Frances. We want to target some of those areas.”

Other communities in the district are also getting involved with North Star Air to build passenger service. Dryden is currently working out similar agreements, and Kenora has had North Star Air operating commercial flights since mid-January.

The report for this revenue agreement has been approved; however, nothing will come into effect until the bylaws surrounding the airline are voted into effect. This is expected to be an agenda item at the next town council meeting on May 25.

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- Yes
- No
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