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Airport upgrade 'crucial'

Dominic Zietsch | 2nd December 2011

A \$2.1 MILLION upgrade to the Clarence Valley Regional Airport has been described as crucial by the council, despite the threat of losing the domestic Regional Express (Rex) air route to Sydney due to rising operating costs.

At a recent meeting, Clarence Valley Council voted unanimously in support of the proposed upgrade, which would include improvements to a number of areas of the facility such as lighting, electric fences, the airstrip, apron and the terminal itself.

Mayor Richie Williamson said the proposed upgrades were necessary to meet new Civil Aviation Safety Authority guidelines.

"We've been in consultation over the last few years with the Federal Aviation Authority and there has been some policy changes with regards to - for example - the lighting on the airstrip, and whilst the policy has changed, they've allowed the strip to continue to operate, but long term the council - as the owners of the strip - needs to comply with the new policies," he said.

To fund the upgrade, Cr Williamson said council would apply for money through the Federal Government's Regional Development Australia (RDA) program, along with an interest-free loan from the State Government - he said the council was hopeful of receiving RDA funding given the regional importance of maintaining the facility.

However, according to Nationals Senator Fiona Nash, who visited the airport on Wednesday, the domestic Rex air route between Grafton and Sydney is under threat due to projected increases in operating costs mostly associated with the Federal Government's carbon price plan and the removal of the regional airline subsidy program.

Cr Williamson said while council was doing everything it could to ensure the domestic service continued, he said the airport upgrade was crucial, regardless of whether Rex remained or not, given the number of non-domestic air services that use it, including air ambulance flights and the Rural Fire Service.