

Source: Port Lincoln Times Online, 19 Feb 08

Air services safe

AIR services to Port Lincoln are safe for now despite serious pilot shortages across Australia, including the Regional Express network.

Eighty Rex pilots resigned between July and January, forcing the airline to suspend new services between Melbourne and Griffith and postpone services from Maryborough to Brisbane and Sydney to Cooma.

Rex general manager of network strategy Warrick Lodge said Rex had to make some "difficult decisions" to cut the number of flights on some of the established routes but he did not see any risk for Port Lincoln services.

Mr Lodge said Rex's partnership with the owner of the airport, the Lower Eyre Peninsula District Council, offered the route more protection than other routes not covered by partnership arrangements because the company had a moral obligation to maintain frequent services.

The council and Rex entered into a partnership last year, which meant Rex would provide more frequent flights, including an extra evening flight from Adelaide and an early morning flight out of Port Lincoln in July, in exchange for a rebate of part of the passenger tax collected by the council where annual passenger numbers exceed specified thresholds.

Mr Lodge said this partnership helped protect the Port Lincoln route from service cuts.

He said Rex would do its best to maintain frequent flights to Port Lincoln despite the pilot shortage.

In response to the pilot shortage, Rex has started its own pilot school with the first 16 cadets due to graduate in July 2008.

"Thereafter we will have about 20 new pilots every three months, largely sheltering Rex from the massive recruitment of our trained pilots by the main airlines," Rex chief pilot Chris Hine said.