



AIRPORT EXTENSION WOULD LINK WELLINGTON WITH SINGAPORE, HONG KONG AND DUBAI

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Direct flights to Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai could be on the cards for the capital if an extension to Wellington [Airport](#)'s runway goes ahead, the council has heard.

But any decision to proceed with the NZ\$300 million move will have to be made without an airline being locked-in to start operating the long-haul flights.

Wellington City councillors were told on Thursday that the city would have to show its hand first when it came to the proposed 300-metre extension because it was unlikely a long-haul airline would put serious consideration into adding the capital as a destination until the longer runway was a certainty.

Alex Welch, from aviation market consultants InterVISTAS, said it could take between six months and several years for an airline to evaluate a new route.

If it does decide to fly there, those plans were rarely announced earlier than six months before the first plane arrived, he said.

But councillors should not be scared by that, Welch said, because his research had shown there were several long-haul routes that could be operated at a profit between Asia and Wellington.

He singled out Singapore, Hong Kong and Dubai as the three destinations with the strongest potential for sustaining between three and seven weekly return flights to the capital by 2019.

Asia-Pacific was expected to experience the biggest growth in aviation traffic over the next 20 years, which would make Wellington a juicy proposition for airlines looking to enter the market, Welch said.

"You guys are so well placed to tap into that growth."

His estimations showed there was greater demand for long-haul flights in Wellington than in some other cities that already had those connections, such as Winnipeg in Canada and Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Deputy mayor Justin Lester said a lot more would need to be known about the runway extension before any commitment was made to funding it.

That picture would become a lot clearer in a week or so when the airport released about 20 more reports, including a cost-benefit analysis, he said.

But the InterVISTAS assessment had given him some comfort that the demand to justify international flights between Wellington and Asia was already there.

"What we now know, with a great degree of comfort, is that we can have direct flights already. So how long should we wait?"

Lester said that while no long-haul airlines would publicly commit to Wellington before ratepayers wrote a cheque for the runway extension, there was the potential to get a closed-door agreement in place.

"Those discussions have already started. We've had expressions of interest in the past," he said.

"We'll need a sufficient degree of confidence that if we do this then it's going to be used, and if we don't have that, then this won't proceed."

But some councillors questioned whether a long-haul airline could decide on a whim to stop operating flights to Wellington if it did not turn out to be profitable.

They were told there was little to stop that from happening, but that airlines generally did not enter a new market to begin with unless they were certain there was a profit to be made.

Wellington Airport chief executive officer Steve Sanderson said all the talk that Wellington would never be able to attract a long-haul airline sounded similar to the naysayers who were against extending the runway in 1972 to allow for trans-tasman flights.

There were now 65 flights a week between Wellington and Australia, he said. "If we didn't have those 65 flights ... then you just couldn't see Wellington being what it is today."

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