

Don't leave the Coast grounded due to 'neglected' airports

COMMENT

Senator Richard Colbeck

IF YOU want to see the difference between investment and neglect, look no further than Tasmania's North-West airports.

While Launceston is attracting new airlines, adding routes and progressing a \$100 million redevelopment, Devonport, in terms of passenger numbers, has gone backwards.

Rex has withdrawn, competition has disappeared and North-West Tasmanians

are increasingly being left with fewer choices, higher costs and less reliable connections.

Nobody begrudges Launceston's success. Strong aviation links are essential for Tasmania. But when part of the state is falling behind, governments need to ask whether all Tasmanians are being served equally.

For a region that already faces a freight disadvantage and the tyranny of distance, we should not be making travel harder.

Successful airports do not

grow by accident.

They attract investment, airline partnerships and government support.

We have seen that in Launceston.

Meanwhile, Devonport has become reliant on a single carrier operating to a single major destination.

Burnie has recovered and exceeded pre-COVID passenger levels, but it too requires investment.

The lack of passenger screening adds makes mainland connections more difficult.

Devonport remains the only Tasmanian airport yet to return to pre-COVID passenger levels.

This is not because demand is lacking. Capacity remains around 25 per cent below pre-pandemic levels, with fewer services and less flexibility when disruptions occur.

The result is that around 450,000 passengers from the North-West Coast each year choose to fly from elsewhere because flights are too expensive or seats are unavailable.

That should concern every level of government.

The North-West is home to major exporters, manufacturers, agricultural producers and tourism operators.

It contributes billions of dollars to the Tasmanian economy, yet its primary airports are being treated as an afterthought.

We should be talking about growth, not managed decline.

That means restoring competition, pursuing additional destinations and investing in infrastructure that improves

reliability and passenger experience.

Strong aviation links are not a luxury for regional Tasmania.

They are essential economic infrastructure.

North-West Tasmania deserves better connectivity, more choice and a plan to unlock the full potential of Devonport and Burnie Airports.

It's time governments got on board and stopped leaving the North-West grounded.

Richard Colbeck is a Liberal Senator for Tasmania.