

Voyageur Airways hits milestone

Company at 225 employees and investing

by Ken Pagan

The Nugget

Voyageur Airways president Max Shapiro announced \$350,000 worth of new investment Thursday that will allow continued expansion of the North Bay-based company. Shapiro said the company recently hit a significant milestone, with 225 employees. Voyageur Airways employed 25 when Shapiro moved operations into the former CFB North Bay hangars in 1996, becoming the first tenant of the Air Base Property Corporation.

"We could have left North Bay back in 1996," Shapiro said. "Fortunately, we were able to get into this building, and make improvements that are still on-going. "We've taken what was basically just a shell and, through these renovations, we've made the business grow." The hangar is nearly 50 years old and Shapiro has "turned profits back into the business," with renovations exceeding \$2.5 million so far. The cost of refurbishing the roof was nearly \$600,000. The company will spend \$250,000 over the next year to refurbish and upgrade the 30-by-12 metre hangar doors. As well, \$100,000 is being spent to create more space for its growing maintenance and repair operations. "What we discovered as we moved in here was we could take our technical expertise and develop some third-party business," Shapiro said, explaining the growth of the workload in repair activity. "That's the portion of the business that has been expanding for the last seven years and continues to expand. The fact that we have this facility has created opportunities for us, which are multiplying." Voyageur has grown from a largely regional operation in 1996 to develop a customer base worldwide.

Vic Fedeli, former chairman of the Air Base Property Corporation, said North Bay was competing with other communities to keep Voyageur Airways in 1996. The hangar space was sold for \$1, but "the building was a disaster." "What the move meant to North Bay was the building was saved from being torn down," Fedeli said. "And not only did Max have to take the building in as-is condition, he invested \$2.5 million in upgrades. Secondly, he immediately began paying hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in municipal taxes. If we didn't give it to him for \$1 back then, who was going to pay the \$300,000 in taxes for that year?" Fedeli said the company's growth in North Bay has resulted in economic spinoffs, and generated landing fees at Jack Garland Airport.

Voyageur Airways, the largest fixed-wing air ambulance operator in Canada, also has operations in Timmins, Sioux Lookout, Moncton, N.B., and Vancouver. The majority of its 225 employees are based in North Bay, where all aircraft repair activity takes place. Shapiro said the company employs many graduates of Canadore College's aviation program and will "definitely" be hiring more people in the future.