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Come on down, the price is right!

Groups fed up with expensive tickets border cross for economic airfares

by Sherryll Sobie

Toronto-based Chris Stefopoulos says it straight up, "When we travel to the U.S. we fly out of Buffalo." As the volunteer manager of Team Impact Wrestling Club, a not-for-profit organization with over 200 members, Stefopoulos grapples with organizing five trips per year, of which one is to a U.S. destination. After 21 years "on the job" the burly, six-foot tall firefighter has earned his battle scars as an accidental planner.

Stefopoulos makes no apologies for favouring U.S. airports over Canadian. "Lost revenue? I don't give it a second thought," he says. And why should he, when online surfing pulls up savings of about \$200-plus per ticket?

"The public isn't stupid," states Tony Pollard, president, Hotel Association of Canada (HAC) in Ottawa. According to a recent HAC survey, 18 per cent of Canadians planned to take a cross border flight this year. Adds Pollard, "We estimate 2.5 million Canadians are regularly travelling to the U.S. to fly."

Which begs the question: Why are our tickets so expensive? Pollard says it's a toxic combination of Canadian airports paying higher-than-average fees, our taxes and less competition amongst Canadian carriers.

High taxes and airline monopolies we Canadians (begrudgingly) understand. But why must our airports pay higher fees, which then get thrust upon our shoulders?

Daniel-Robert Gooch, director, communications and policy, Canadian Airports Council in

Ottawa, says it comes down to a dated business model. When the federal government privatized airports back in the 1990s, they set up a 60-year rent-lease model that has since earned them an annual income of approximately \$260 million. "But it's not a traditional tenant-landlord relationship," says Gooch. "The feds have all the benefits of a landlord without the responsibility." Meaning they collect rent but don't pay for upgrades, maintenance or administration.

According to a September 2010 report entitled, *The Strategic Impact of the Canadian Aviation Based Travel and Tourism Industry on Canada's Economy*, "... the term 'rent' is used loosely and some industry experts argue that it is more of a 'tax.'"

Regardless of terminology, it all adds up to expensive tickets and a crippling domino effect of lost revenue for Canadian airports and other local businesses like ground transportation, restaurants, hotels, entertainment and more. And where does this leave Team Impact Wrestling Club? Says Stefopoulos, "The first place I'll search for airfares to U.S. destinations will always be Buffalo, and then

I'll work backwards from there." *

Percentage of cars with Canadian license plates parked at Buffalo Niagara International Airport's long-term lots:
40
Source: HAC

The siren to the south

- Buffalo Niagara Airport Authority has set up a website aimed at Canadian travellers (including a model on the home page wearing a Maple Leaf jersey) canflyus.com
- Plattsburgh International Airport bills itself as "Montreal's U.S. airport" and sometimes broadcasts a Montreal radio station in its terminal with songs in French and English. flyplattsburgh.com