

# **COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT**

SOUTHLAND TIMES, 9 MAY 2009

## **THE HOTSEAT**

YES! The eagle has landed. After years of campaigning, a large new jet is finally landing at Invercargill Airport. For me it all started with Airport '94 when a group of businessmen led by John Wright and a couple of local government representatives decided to meet every week for two hours over a two year period with nothing on the agenda except, 'how can we develop an international airport'? The theory was that Invercargill was dying because we were at the end of a dead end road. We had to be part of a loop. We had to be on the way to somewhere, and as we were the closest city in New Zealand to Australia, that was our destination of choice.

Establishing an international airport wasn't easy. We had to extend the runway; construct a departure lounge; extend security fences and find an Australian partner. Clyde Harding proved to be an excellent partner whose travel company organised more tours by Australians to New Zealand than any other travel company in operation at that time.

Then, a few weeks before blast off, Clyde died of a heart attack. Our international airport was doomed, but with the formation of Venture Southland the scheme was resurrected and this time the charge was led by Wayne Affleck. The runway was lengthened again and countless meetings took place between Venture and some of the 21 airlines that were flying across the Tasman at the time. In the midst of an economic boom we just couldn't make our airport fly.

It seems ironic that it took a global recession to make our international airport viable. I must admit that despite the litany of failures, I've always had faith in our airport. We have the third longest runway in New Zealand; local geography makes it a safe airport and it's seldom closed by adverse weather. In terms of tourism, Invercargill is a perfect alternate airport for Queenstown which is the obvious jewel in our region's tourism crown. Up to 50 flights a year are diverted from Queenstown and Dunedin.

I've always felt that if you build solid infrastructure, then the people will come. When we built the velodrome we had no idea we would attract three consecutive national track cycling championships. However once we had built a world class facility then naturally the cyclists all wanted to race in Invercargill.

Our new hockey turf is a similar example. During construction there were no plans for an international hockey tournament, but once it was built then the eyes of the hockey world focused firmly on Southland.

I've spent two days in Christchurch along with most of the South Island's Mayors and CEOs hearing horror stories about leaking homes; gang patches in Wanganui; dog attacks in Invercargill and the demise of the Celtic Tigers in Ireland. New Zealand and Ireland have similar populations, but while we have 37,000 unemployed, Ireland has 350,000. Also, by world standards our 'protein economy' is holding up well. We produce food rather than bling and with the world's population climbing from 3 billion to 7 billion in the last two decades, food should always be in demand.

The other big subject discussed was the new super city for Auckland. No-one seemed to express much confidence in the new city, and in particular the speed with which it is being established, as well as the lack of consultation. We don't have that problem in our city. In fact our Voice Your Choice campaign is aimed at hearing your views on the future of representation in local government in Invercargill. I hope you will make the effort to let us know your thoughts.