

# Winnipeg Free Press

## Air show aims to prevent traffic turmoil SOUTHPORT SPECTACLE PLANNING FOR 20,000 DAILY VISITORS

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RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES

There will be 13 air acts at this year's Manitoba Airshow, taking place July 7-8, including the Canadian Forces Snowbirds.

Cars were stuck in gridlock for hours on the Trans-Canada Highway and reams of people with tickets never even made it inside last time the Manitoba Airshow was held.

The air show at Southport near Portage la Prairie was expecting 3,000 to 6,000 visitors and 18,000 showed up.

The gridlock won't happen again, organizers say.

"We're hoping for 10,000 per day, but prepared for 20,000 per day," said Peggy May, executive director of Southport Airport, who is in charge of this year's air show.

The air show is back after a two-year hiatus and is scheduled for the weekend of July 7-8. The festival coincides with strawberry picking at the many U-pick farms around Portage.

It's also on the same weekend as the 146th Portage Industrial Exhibition on Island Park, which includes a midway, stage shows, horticulture and horse ring. People attending the air show can drop in on the exhibition afterwards, May said.

However, the air show also coincides with the Winnipeg Folk Festival, which could cut into its numbers.

May said the air show is scheduled a month later than in 2016 partly in hopes of more settled weather, but largely due to the availability of the Canadian Forces Snowbirds. "They'll be coming back from the Canada Day celebrations in Ottawa," May said.

The air show had been in dormancy since 2009, when avid flyer and University of Manitoba geography professor Jill Oakes, along with some students and flight clubs, volunteered to put on the show.

Organizers ran into a pent-up demand that helped to overwhelm their preparations, May said.

This time, the show is being put on by Southport and KF Aerospace, which manages the contract for flight training for the military at Southport. "We know

our airport best," May said.

However, it wasn't just that organizers underestimated the crowd in 2016. May said there was also construction on the highway between Elie and Portage that contributed to the bumper-to-bumper traffic. It also rained for two weeks leading up to the air show, beating up the secondary roads leading to the event.

This time, traffic will arrive on two main highways to three site-access points, then funnelled into six parking-lot access points leading into 10 parking lots.

"There are things you learn every time you put on a large event like this. I've always learned that air shows are all about planes, porta-potties and parking," May said.

The route planning was arrived at with the help of Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation. RCMP will also help out. "We have enough spots for 10,000-plus cars per day and that means we can easily accommodate 20,000 people, if not more," she said.

There will be 13 air acts on each of the two days between noon and 4 p.m., including the Canadian Forces Snowbirds, a CF-188 Hornet fighter plane and the SkyHawks parachuting from an aircraft. The air show site will be open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., with numerous parked planes on display. Military planes are the theme this year, but there will also be civilian aircraft.

At last count, 26 food vendors will set up on-site. There will also be children's events, a craft beer garden and a regular beer garden.

Unlike two years ago, there will be internet connectivity provided by COW (Cellular On Wheels), which allows for improved coverage for large events. COW was used during the Whiteout street parties during the Winnipeg Jets playoff games.

The Manitoba Airshow is a not-for-profit event, with any proceeds split with local community charities and military charities.

Organizers held a town hall meeting in Portage in March to let the community know its plans, its improved strategy to handle traffic and to make a call-out for

volunteers. The show has a large contingent of volunteers, including many military personnel.

It's recommended people buy tickets in advance so they can enter more quickly on bypass lanes into the site. Early-bird tickets can be purchased online until Friday. People should bring a blanket or folding chair for seating, as well as ear protection, especially for young children. Pets are not permitted on the grounds.

Southport is located three kilometres south of Portage la Prairie, and 70 kilometres west of Winnipeg.

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## **Bill Redekop**

*Rural Reporter*

Bill Redekop is the Free Press rambling rural reporter. His beat is a bit like the slow food movement of news gathering.

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