



Wonderboom National Airport

By Athol Franz



Wonderboom National Airport (WNA), a cornerstone of South Africa's aviation training sector, is facing a significant shift in its fee structure that could have far-reaching consequences. Historically, flying schools operating at WNA have benefited from an 80% discount for Air Traffic Control (ATC) and navigation fees, a policy designed to support pilot training. This practice, commonly referred to as 'training fees', has also been extended to most other regional airports, fostering growth in the aviation sector.

However, the recent budgeting process within the City of Tshwane Municipality Metro (CTMM), which owns the WNA, has now proposed a phased reduction of these discounts over the next three years. Under the proposed plan, the 80% discount will be reduced to 50% in the 2024 / 25 financial year, then to 25% in 2025 / 26 and finally to 10% in 2026 / 27.

Despite historical evidence and current realities that suggest otherwise, the management at WNA is nurturing the idea that a scheduled airline could soon again begin operating from the airport. While these ambitions may sound promising, they seem to be based on an overly optimistic view of the regional aviation market.

“ The death of Wonderboom airport is certain if the proposed new fee structure goes ahead ”

Public knowledge shows that Gauteng's major airports, OR Tambo International Airport (ORT) and Lanseria International Airport (LIA) are not operating at anywhere near full capacity. This raises a critical question: Where would this anticipate commercial air traffic for Wonderboom come from?

The abrupt change in fee structure has raised serious concerns among stakeholders. The rationale behind the reduction is based on the premise that the discounted training tariffs were used to attract flight schools to WNA and now that these businesses are established, the subsidy is deemed unnecessary.

However, the lack of prior notice and consultation has alarmed flight schools, potentially making pilot training unaffordable and inaccessible. In 2021 certain flight schools at WNA were forced to approach the High Court in Pretoria to address this very same issue.

Fortunately, in that instance the court granted an interdict that ATC training tariffs must remain as they were. Despite this interdict that has not been addressed by Wonderboom's management, this strategy has once again reared its ugly head.

With 21 training schools at WNA serving at least 1,000 students monthly, the repercussions of this decision could be severe. Flight schools, which are also tenants at WNA, may have no choice but to relocate, adversely impacting the airport's revenue and the local economy of Tshwane.

This potential exodus could result in a significant loss to Tshwane's GDP, estimated at around R1 billion over two years, including students' living expenses, entertainment and transportation. The anticipated increase in

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ATC landing and navigation fees would bring an estimated R7 to R8 million directly to the airport.

However, this gain could be overshadowed by the migration of flight schools and students, resulting in a significantly larger loss to the local economy. The current management's goal to transform Wonderboom into a major international hub appears overly ambitious and misaligned with the airport's infrastructure and geographical limitations.

I spoke to the CEOs of two of South Africa's domestic and regional airlines and both commented that Wonderboom was not an option nor would be for years to come due to its location north of Pretoria and due to the fact that ORT services the needs of these airlines as a significant hub for the region.

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“ While the WNA’s management has expressed grand plans to attract airlines such as Qatar Airways, the airport faces several significant barriers to becoming a major international hub: ”



- Just 70 kilometres away, OR Tambo is South Africa's primary hub with the capacity to handle large jets and state services.
- WNA's main runway is far too short and narrow for large jets, whilst the second runway is even shorter. Widening or lengthening would be costly and impractical, given the surrounding residential areas.
- The single-lane road access and inadequate regional infrastructure are additional constraints that hinder the feasibility of a major international hub.
- Instead of pursuing an international hub, Wonderboom's management could focus on capitalising on existing opportunities within the airport's current structure to increase revenue and support the local economy.
- The airport has ample land on the eastern side for hangar and taxiway development, attracting more aviation-related businesses, such as firefighting, aircraft engineering, avionics and airport management training.
- Addressing the aircraft refuelling situation and improving the security system could lead to significant cost savings and enhanced security.
- A comprehensive overhaul of the current management, focusing on expertise in aviation and airport operations, could transform WNA into a profitable and efficient regional airport.

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The time has come for the CTMM to reconsider its strategy and engage in meaningful consultation with stakeholders to ensure the sustainable growth of Wonderboom and its pivotal role in aviation training.

Kind regards,
Nnditsheni Madavha
(Wonderboom Airport Manager)

Summing up this situation:

- 1) It appears that WNA's management is prepared to take the matter down the very same road it did in 2021 when the airport lost the High Court case brought about due to the very same ATC fees situation.
- 2) As I have already indicated with serious attention to the various deficiencies at the airport such as the poor security situation with far too many security guards who sit around all day as well as the aircraft fuel situation that has been problematic for at least a decade due to the appointment of BBEE suppliers that have failed.
- 3) WNA's lack of attention to the basics of good management and communication with its stakeholders has also been a long-time problem that requires addressing.
- 4) My investigations have shown that the ATC tariffs at all the other regional airports such as Grand Central, Rand Airport, Lanseria International Airport, Krugersdorp airport, Springs airport and Brakpan airport have shown that discounted training fees apply at all these airports.
- 5) Airport approach, landing and ATC fees are also gazetted at all Airports Company South Africa (ACSA) at a 70% discount for the purpose of aircrew training.

With overwhelming evidence that suggests the streamlining and support of the various aviation training organisations already based at WNA, the airport could become the preferred training facility as well as economically viable in the future. ✈️

PROPOSED
2024/25FY TARIFF
STRUCTURE
(ANNEXURE H3.1)

Objective: To reduce the budget shortfall of **R 45,168,263.72**

Considerations:

- (1) Cost of doing business
- (2) Inflation
- (3) Tariffs from other Airports
- (4) Other Cost increments

ALL Airport Fees:

1. All Airport Fees for the 2024/25FY were increased by an average of **5%** which is lower than the prevailing rate of Inflation of **5.6%**
2. The **80%** discount on aeronautical fees for aircrew training activities is as proposed reviewed down as follows:

2024/25FY	2025/26FY	2026/27FY
50%	25%	10%

3. **NB:** Aircrew training currently constitutes **60%** of the *traffic movements* of Wonderboom National Airport but contributes **9%** to the to the total *aeronautical revenue* generated by the Airport.

