

A community vision for Wānaka Airport



Presented by Wānaka Stakeholders Group Inc.
21 May 2025



Wānaka Airport - your airport - and the future of your community



Wānaka Airport is at a crossroads. Our council has embarked on a review of the airport, the first official future planning for the airport since the lease handing Wānaka Airport over to Queenstown Airport Corporation was overturned in the High Court.

Careful planning for the future is important. It is crucial that everyone in our community has the opportunity to participate and begins to think now about what direction our airport should take. Any plan should be one the whole Upper Clutha community can support, with strong local input into governance, management, accountability and investment.

Some might say that airports are too complex for the community to understand. That's not the case. There are good examples of community-run airports overseas and there are also many people in our community with a long aviation history. But decisions, once made (by a community or on its behalf) have intergenerational impacts. In fact, some have recently been made prior to the proposed QLDC masterplanning process. We must ensure that plans for Wānaka Airport are well thought through, and community led.

The vision below might be for 10-20 years from today. It has been formulated by Wānaka Stakeholders Group after ongoing dialogue within the community: community groups, residents associations, airport users and more. Our aim is to promote widespread discussion and feedback, and we'll be adding further information to this work as it evolves.

Let's ensure Wānaka Airport becomes a community asset we continue to be proud of - not just one that acts as an overflow for Queenstown Airport, or is driven by a simplistic growth mantra which does not factor in community wishes.

So that starts with you: What do you think?

A wide-angle photograph of a stunning landscape. In the foreground, a road curves along the edge of a steep, green hillside. The hillside is covered in dense, low-lying vegetation. To the left, a small portion of a road sign is visible. The middle ground is dominated by a deep blue lake, its surface calm and reflecting the surrounding environment. On the far shore of the lake, there are some small, green, grassy islands. In the background, a majestic range of mountains stretches across the horizon. The mountains are dark and rugged, with patches of white snow clinging to their peaks. The sky above is a clear, pale blue with a few wispy white clouds.

A community vision
for Wānaka Airport

A wide-angle landscape photograph of a mountain range at sunset. The sky is filled with warm, orange, and yellow hues, transitioning into cooler blues and purples. In the foreground, there's a town with numerous houses and trees, some of which have autumn-colored leaves. The background is dominated by a range of mountains, their peaks partially obscured by the low-hanging clouds.

The vision for Wānaka Airport is to become a locally led, independent, smart, and future-oriented aviation hub that balances local needs, economic vitality, and environmental impacts. It aims to support a vibrant mix of aviation activities, local businesses and R&D, while remaining proudly run by and for the Upper Clutha community.



How might we be talking about our community airport in 10 or 20 years' time?

Wānaka Airport is a truly unique aviation hub.

Located in a region of outstanding natural beauty and just a 10-minute drive from the heart of Wānaka, this community airport blends functionality with a strong community character. For decades it has supported a vibrant mix of general aviation (predominantly private pilots), commercial aviation (often serving tourism and agricultural sectors), and a range of support businesses (aviation and general). More recently, Wānaka Airport is now regarded as a high tech aviation R&D hub as well as a training centre of excellence. It also hosts the biennial Warbirds Over Wānaka event and NASA's ongoing research operations. Limited scheduled domestic flights are reviewed biennially to ensure compatibility with the community's aspirations. There is no other airport quite like it.

What further sets Wānaka Airport apart is its proximity - just 70km - to Queenstown International Airport, a well-established commercial aviation gateway for Central Otago and the lower South Island, which continues to serve our district well now, and into the future. This leaves Wānaka Airport to succeed as a smaller scale, community led airport.

Wānaka Airport has grown with committed and enterprising management, guided by strong governance and ongoing community dialogue. Its governing board - comprised largely of Upper Clutha community representatives - has ensured the airport's development is closely aligned with the needs of the Upper Clutha community. Financial transparency, consistent communication, and a values-driven approach to airport operations are hallmarks of this governance. Importantly, the airport is independent of Queenstown Airport Corporation (QAC), whose focus is primarily commercial and growth-oriented.





By contrast, Queenstown Airport serves jet aircraft flying both domestic and international passengers, and has retained the capacity to increase flight volumes if desired by the region's communities. In addition three other jet capable airports in the lower South Island (Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill) offer increasingly competitive national and international air services, growing to meet demand, and importantly dispersing tourism across wider regional pathways and reducing the potential for "bottleneck tourism" in Wānaka and Queenstown. Both communities have been clear that they wish to avoid growth-at-any-cost and overtourism.

In 2016 QAC purchased land surrounding Wānaka Airport for potential future development. Following the 2025-2026 Wanaka Airport Review QAC divested its interest, and that land has since been under the control of the Wānaka Airport Board. This change secured space for flexible future development while eliminating any potential conflict of interest and keeping the best interests of the local community at heart.

As a community asset, Wānaka Airport is not driven by shareholder demands or a growth-at-all-costs mindset. It treats the local businesses at the airport fairly, and respects local users access. Operating costs are managed prudently, and are covered by modest income. The overarching goal is to support safe, efficient and future-oriented aviation services while continuing the airport's legacy as an important community resource.

Long term intergenerational thinking is a central pillar. The airport's direct and indirect impact on the environment - land, water, climate, air pollution - the local community, and the regional economy is carefully considered and balanced. This includes innovative steps such as fully electric short-hop flights, powered by local, sustainable electricity.

The local community is proud of Wānaka Airport, which is why every three years when their terms come up, there is an impressive selection of local candidates all vying to be voted onto the Airport's board.



Developed by Wānaka Stakeholders Group Inc., by many of its core members, advisors in the community, and after consulting with ALL the residents and community associations in the Upper Clutha, plus the Wānaka Airport Users Group, plus Wao Aotearoa.

www.protectwanaka.nz // community@wsg.org.nz