

IN THE MATTER of the Resource Management Act  
1991

AND

IN THE MATTER submissions and further  
Submissions lodged by  
Mercer Airport Limited  
on the Proposed Waikato  
District Plan

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STATEMENT OF EVIDENCE OF DONELLA CLARE BOND ON BEHALF OF  
MERCER AIRPORT LIMITED AS SUBMITTER

SUBMITTER REFERENCE 921

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## INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is Donella Clare Bond, but I am more commonly known as Dee Bond.
2. I am a shareholder/director of both Neale Russell Ltd (the Airport Land Owner), and Palms on George Ltd (the Airport Operator). I have held these positions for 12 years since we established these companies. We have owned the airfield for 10 years. We also own and have redeveloped the award-winning Qualmark-rated 4.5 star Tuakau Hotel, Tuakau Bridge Motorhome Park, George Street Properties (soon to open accommodation and retail development in Tuakau), Mercer Motel and soon to open Mercer Landing Kitchen & Bar.

### Background and Experience

3. I am a Chartered Accountant with 40 years accounting and business experience in corporate and government in New Zealand and Singapore, having trained at Victoria University of Wellington in the late 1970s in Accountancy and Commercial Law.
4. I am also a Commercial Pilot with 35 years' experience, logging over 4,800 hours total flight time and am a senior Flight Instructor with 1,800 hours instructing on single-engine, multi-engine, land and sea aircraft. I was Chief Flying Instructor and Operations Manager for Auckland Aero Club at Ardmore before joining a small commuter airline Air2There.com in Paraparaumu and more latterly was a senior flight instructor for CTC Aviation (now L3 Airline Academy) at Hamilton Airport before we purchased Mercer Airport.
5. I have represented New Zealand internationally in the sport of Precision and Rally Flying, ferried light aircraft across the Pacific to the USA and to England via Asia and the Middle East and was an international Juror for the 2001 London to Sydney Air Race. I race aircraft in the annual Air Race Classic in USA which I won in 2017. I have also organised air races in New Zealand and have raced here in the Great Northern Air Race and the Around New Zealand Air Races.
6. I am currently the President of the New Zealand Precision and Rally Flying Association and am an International Board Director of the Ninety-Nines Inc, the largest female pilot association in the world with over 6000 members. I also represent the New Zealand Association of Women in Aviation (NZAWA) with the NZ Civil Aviation Authority at the New Zealand MET Symposiums and at the New Southern Skies Symposiums.

7. I am a founding member, Captain, and currently the Secretary for the New Zealand Catalina Preservation Society Inc and a trustee shareholder/director of The Catalina Company (NZ) Ltd. I am also a member of the Aircraft Owners & Pilots Assn (AOPA) in both NZ and USA, a member and past Treasurer of the NZAWA, a member of the Experimental Aircraft Assn (EAA), and a member of the Australian Women Pilots Assn (AWPA), the Cessna C180/C185 Club, as well as our local Aero Club – Waikato in Hamilton.
8. I am actively involved in our local community and sit on the Executive Committees of the Tuakau & Districts Development Assn (Tuakau Business Assn) and the Mercer Community Committee. We host the Scouts and Cubs for their aviation badges at the airport, the Auckland Aerobatic Club for its competitions, the Auckland Aero Club and Airline Flying Club for their competitions, and in 2016 the NZAWA for its annual Rally over Queens Birthday Weekend.

#### Background to Mercer Airport

9. Back in 2010 we were not actively seeking an airfield to purchase, but when this airfield presented itself at mortgagee sale it offered an opportunity to provide a location close to Auckland and Ardmore where we could build a hangar to house the 1944 WWII Catalina amphibious flying boat, a piece of New Zealand's aviation heritage, that we had bought out of Africa in October 1994 (after losing our first Catalina on its ferry flight from the USA in January 1994). Since 1995 the Catalina has been parked outside in the elements at either Ardmore airfield or our maintenance base at New Plymouth airport and it became evident that the winter storms and summer sun were taking their toll on the aircraft, not to mention the humid maritime salt-laden air our island paradise is located in.
10. We particularly needed to find a place for the aircraft to winter over, and the only places with hangars big enough were Air NZ hangars (the Catalina has the same wingspan as a Boeing B737 – 104ft), or with the Air Force. In more recent years following a 4 year major overhaul of the wings (2011-2015) we have been graciously hosted by the Air Force at Ohakea for the winters, until this COVID year meant the hangars were needed for other purposes, so the aircraft has been parked in the winter weather at New Plymouth.
11. In 2010 we met with the Waikato District Council Mayor Alan Sanson and the then Head of Regulatory, Nath Pritchard, to discuss our vision for the airfield and what we needed to do. They

recommended we undertake a minor variation to the existing 1996 Resource Consent to bring it in line with how the airfield was being used and how we saw it developing. They also recommended we have it recognised in the District Plan as part of the District Review process at a later date.

12. Consequently, we undertook the application for the minor variations which included recognition of the whole 1360 m x104 m land block as an airfield; provision of a safe runway for use year-round in all weather by removing the reference to grass; and clarification of the term “movements”. This resulted in major increases in regulatory oversight requirements when issued; after a Council hearing and successful Environment Court appeal resolution in March 2014.
13. When we purchased Mercer Airport, it was in a state of disrepair following a long period of neglect. During the past 10 years we have been improving the airfield year-on-year and in 2018 we lodged a submission to have it recognised in the District Plan with its own Zone, as previously recommended by the Mayor and his senior Council personnel.
14. Most recently we have completed the relocation and construction of a WWII 80 m x44 m (Catalina) Hangar on-site and will be commissioning an automated avgas fuel facility in early 2021.
15. Since purchasing the airfield we have attracted three businesses and three flying clubs to be based there, with growing interest for more activity. Rocket Lab undertake their rocket-engine testing at Mercer before launching from the Mahia Peninsula, GoSkyDive operate tandem skydiving for tourists and skydive training for sports skydivers, and West Aero provide Licenced Aircraft Maintenance Engineering services to aircraft from throughout the district and beyond.
16. The clubs include two model flying clubs – Papakura Manukau Aeromodellers Club and Northern Miniature Aerobatics Club, as well as the Auckland Regional Microlight Aircraft Club Inc.
17. We also operate the 30-bed Mercer Hotel Backpackers on-site and lease out two residential properties we own adjacent to the airfield, as well as operate a licenced café for group functions and events on-site.

18. In 2018, as part of the Local Government representation review, our local community of interest at Mercer township, lobbied successfully to have the airfield included in the meshblock it is associated with. We are very humbled that the community wanted to embrace the airfield as their own.

#### Future Vision for Mercer Airport

19. Our business model is about taking ailing properties and reinvigorating them so that they become an asset that people want to associate with and utilise and the community can be proud of. To that end we, along with a number of other local tourism operators, established Franklin Tourism in 2012 to help grow the tourism activity in the region and stimulate economic growth. The intervening years have seen tourism grow year-on-year in the district.

20. Our vision is to protect the Mercer airfield for future generations by having it recognised in the Waikato District Plan. To that end we have developed a noise profile that will inform an Air Noise Boundary so neighbours will be alerted about higher noise levels and acoustic insulation requirements for any new houses. We have also requested an Obstacle Limitation Surface (OLS) to identify the lower limits of the aerodrome airspace above which objects become obstacles to aircraft operations at the airfield in accordance with Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) requirements for an operation such as Mercer Airport. These will create flexible provisions to enable the airport to develop and grow over time.

21. As Auckland grows south and Hamilton grows north, the ability to operate chartered and scheduled freight and passenger transport operations from Mercer will become vital for the region, and we expect to see this demand develop as the district grows.

22. In 2020 we took the opportunity to seal the gravel access road in order to reduce the dust nuisance for the tenants in 590A & B, and for the airfield users. This also assisted our neighbour, who has increased their milk production and tanker truck activity on the road, by significantly reducing dust spread across the adjoining paddocks and enabling the trucks to travel at normal road speed.

23. As New Zealand came out of COVID-19 lockdown we saw an increased interest from people wanting to learn to fly during the past 8 months, and both the Microlight Club and a new

General Aviation flight instruction start-up business are growing and keeping busy with flight training.

24. We recently commissioned a flight simulator that will enable those airline pilots laid off by COVID-19 to regain IFR currency before they return to work for the airlines once the international borders reopen.
25. Future plans also include developing a Museum for the Catalina and for the NZAWA for Women in Aviation, as well as growing our youth education programs.
26. New Zealanders are wanting to see their own country and we are seeing increased enquiry from commercial charter operators to move their clients to or from Mercer. We would like to think that a regular scheduled air service might grow from this.
27. In 2020 we completed reconstruction of the World War Two "Catalina" hangar and have installed an Avgas refuelling station, soon to be commissioned, which has contributed to demand for hangar space at an all-time high for the airfield, with existing hangars and containers now full to capacity.
28. A new CAA certified engine and propeller workshop will open in 2021 and the "Catalina" hangar is currently being fitted out to accommodate the increased growth in the maintenance facilities onsite. With this increased activity we expect to see other complimentary aviation businesses either start up or relocate to Mercer as well, further boosting economic development in the area.
29. The airfield also now regularly hosts agricultural spraying and aerial surveying operators, and during 2020 was the testing site for the new Pacific Aerospace SUPER-PAC XL aircraft for their take-off and landing tests. Our Aircraft Maintenance provider has been approached to service light jet aircraft and we expect demand for helicopter work to follow.
30. In 2020 we hosted the AkroFest for the North Island aerobatic competitions and we expect them to become a regular feature on our annual calendar of events. We now have at least one of the aerobatic competitors basing their aircraft at Mercer as they can launch immediately into the training area without having to spend time commuting to the training area to practice.

These aircraft by their nature have small fuel tanks, so being able to spend those extra minutes practicing, rather than commuting, is invaluable to the pilots.

31. Other events we have hosted are the NZ Women In Aviation Assn (NZAWA) annual Rally, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Assn (AOPA) Northern Safari, the Royal NZ Aero Clubs Flying NZ Regional Competitions and local Aero Clubs' club competitions, and we hope to host the Great Northern Air Race as well as the National Flying Championships in years to come. The Auckland Gliding Club traditionally head to Matamata for the winters but they may also look to base closer to their Drury home in future years if we can provide the facilities they need. We also provide aviation support to the Hampton Downs Motorsport Park during their events.
32. While we have a licenced café on- site, it has only seen irregular patronage during the past 5+years, mostly around these events, but with the growing aviation community utilising the airfield we expect that it will become a more regular feature for both tenants and visitors to the airfield that will become self-sustaining.
33. When applying to Airways Corporation to get access to the controlled airspace above the airfield for skydiving 10 years ago, they advised us that it would be more feasible to establish Instrument Approaches for IFR aircraft operating by day or night, and with the advent of ADSB tracking becoming mandatory for all aircraft operating in controlled airspace by 31 December 2021 we expect that more aircraft will be looking for an instrument approach to Mercer in the future. Consequently, we have designed the airfield to meet the IFR requirements.
34. As part of our community engagement, we have developed a program for youth that we are using with both the Scouts and the local schools, and we expect to grow this into a holiday program as part of STEM education syllabus in the local schools. In the future we expect to recruit and train youth into the aviation industry at Mercer, in the same way that we developed the hospitality opportunities for youth in Tuakau when we developed the Tuakau Hotel from a tavern (employing just 10 staff) into a 4.5 Star hotel (employing 45 staff) and support the local colleges to develop a hospitality program within their curriculum. We have similar aspirations for the Mercer Airport.
35. My other aspiration is to develop an Aviation Museum at Mercer Airport for the Catalina Flying Boat, and for Women in Aviation, giving both a permanent home where we can develop safe

protocols around archives and displays, and develop them as a tourist destination, giving local scenic flights as well.

36. In time we might even look to provide residential accommodation above hangars so people may live, as well and play and work on-site. AirParks are becoming increasingly popular places for people to live and indulge in their passion for flight.

37. I hope that the vision we have for the Mercer Airport, as North Waikato develops, fits with the Council plans for this region, and you will support our application to have the Airport recognised in the District Plan.

Dee Bond

15 February 2021

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