$100m airport opens up world of possibility

By Sharon Smallwood

THE Great Wall of China could be closer than you think, with the first international charter flight from that part of the world expected to land at the Whitsunday Coast Airport in time for Chinese New Year in 2016.

While this is just a preliminary step towards full international passenger and export flights, it is part of a $100 million, 20-year plan aimed at making these a reality.

First on the list for achieving international status is an expansion of the runway by 327m to 2.4km in the next five years.

There's also plenty of work to be done on the terminal, at an estimated cost of $60 million just for stage one.

To fund the expansion, Whitsunday Regional Council, which currently controls the community asset, is about to test the market for a public/private partnership venture in which it will retain a majority share of 51%.

Chinese billionaire Raymond Wang has confirmed he will lodge an expression of interest and other investors are believed to be waiting in the wings.

Perusing the airport's master plan at its launch last week, members of the tourism and real estate industries were excited by the obvious potential of the expansion.

PRDnationwide Whitsunday principal Christie Leet said the greater the access to the region the better, while Al Grundy from Explore Whitsundays said the increase in domestic flights was already producing results.

"We've just had our best year in five years with the sailing tours around the islands and about 6000 of our customers in the last 12 months have arrived through the airport here," he said.

Council's chief executive officer Scott Waters said the airport's capacity had already grown from 14 to 31 return flights per week, with both the facility and its airline partners poised to celebrate a record year, ahead of projected double-digit growth.

TAKING FLIGHT: Whitsunday Regional council CEO Scott Waters and Mayor Jennifer Whitney unveiling the 20-year master plan for the airport last week. Photo: Sharon Smallwood

UPGRADES

- **Runway expansion – $8.86m**
- **Apron expansion – $7.66m**
- **Existing infrastructure overlay – $10.05m**
- **Domestic terminal expansion – $15.84m**
- **Car park expansion – $2.7m**