

Proposal for a new airport at Tom Price

Why is a new airport at Tom Price needed?

Rio Tinto Iron Ore's (RTIO) Pilbara operations are expanding considerably. The company has announced plans to produce 320 million tonnes per annum by 2012. This increase will mean that the majority of employees will be working closer to Tom Price than Paraburdoo.

The current Paraburdoo facility was developed to cater for residential users and ad-hoc staff travel to the West Pilbara and could not handle the extra traffic.

RTIO has looked at the following options to meet the future air travel demands:

Upgrading Paraburdoo

Paraburdoo Airport is 30 years old and although it has been upgraded over time, extensive work is required to meet changing Federal Government security requirements and RTIO's workload. Without this, the airport will be restricted to Code 3C sized jets (or smaller) and could not operate the larger aircraft which RTIO are likely to require in the near future.

Even if Paraburdoo Airport is upgraded, it will still be located further away from the 'employee centre of gravity' than Tom Price. Also there is no guarantee that Brockman 4 could be serviced from Paraburdoo and it is highly likely that a dedicated mine site airstrip at Brockman 4 would still be required, in addition to Brockman 2 and Paraburdoo, because the two hour (140km) travel time from Paraburdoo is not ideal for employees.

Building more site specific airstrips

RTIO already operates site airstrips at its Brockman, West Angelas, Pannawonica and Yandicoogina mines. In reality, these airstrips have proven to be highly restrictive. Operations in the East Pilbara have shown that continuing with the strategy of site specific airstrips could result in airway congestion and safety issues during peak travel periods.

Economies of scale show that larger planes can be less expensive per seat, fly faster and provide higher levels of passenger comfort, which in turn can make up much of the 'door to door' travel time if a 'hub' airport and bus 'spoke' strategy were developed.

Air travel is not core to RTIO's business but is key to successfully managing our operations. Having one well-used airport will be more cost efficient, allow for more professional management and help meet ever increasing aviation security requirements, which would be complicated and costly to introduce at multiple airports.

As a result of these factors, RTIO's preferred position is to build a new airport at Tom Price so staff can fly into this central airport and then be bussed out to the various sites.

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What will the airport be named?

In the current project documentation we are referring to the 'Tom Price Airport' however a formal decision on the airport's name has not been made. Names also need to be selected for the terminal building and the access road.

Will the airport benefit regional tourism?

The Karijini National Park is a world class eco-tourist destination. The proposed location of the new airport should help further develop the tourism industry by improving access to Karijini National Park.

Tourism is one of the few non-mining activities in the area and an industry that can help ensure the long-term sustainability of Pilbara communities. In support of this, RTIO signed a Pilbara Tourism Partnership with North West Tourism in June 2006.

The airport will be a positive legacy after mining has ceased in the West Pilbara.

Building a new airport now at Tom Price at the same time as the proposed tourist motel should provide a significant boost to the Pilbara / Karijini tourist business and has been strongly supported by Tourism WA.

Where will it be built?

The proposed airport location is approximately 18kms north of Tom Price and some 2kms in from the Tom Price/Karratha Road. A sealed access road from the Tom Price/Karratha Road to the terminal building will be built.

The Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) has approved the proposed site.

How much will it cost? Who is paying?

RTIO will fund the new airport however, some funds may be requested from government authorities for the non-core and tourist related facilities.

The full cost will only be known after a final design has been developed but it is expected to be in the region of \$40 million.

Who will own/operate the airport?

The airport will be owned and operated by RTIO, with third parties providing jet and passenger services, just as Paraburdoo operates today.

Shire of Ashburton and State Government representatives will be consulted during the design phase of the project.

What is the project timeline?

The Feasibility Study is expected to be completed by the end of 2008. At that time a decision will be made whether or not to move ahead with construction of the new airport.

If the decision to go ahead is made, then commissioning of the new airport is expected by September 2009. The airport will be designed for a +30 year life.

What airlines will use the new airport and what size planes will land?

The airport will be designed to accept aircraft types up to size of 'Code 4C' (B737 or A320) size. Smaller jets (eg B717 & BAe146) and all general aviation sized aircraft will also be suitable.

Based on the airline companies currently providing services to the West Pilbara, Qantas, Skywest and Karratha Flying Service could be expected to use the airport. It is reasonable to expect some new entrants, possibly providing tourist flights over the Karijini National Park Gorges. RTIO is aware that one small aviation provider has been in discussions with the State Government over the use of the small dirt strip at the junction of the Marandoo Mine Road for just this reason.

Where will the flights from Tom Price go to?

The runway length has been designed to allow intrastate travel with most flights expected to return to Perth. A runway extension may allow interstate travel.

The new airport will act a hub for FIFO from Perth to Brockman 4, Marandoo and other mine sites. It will also act as a hub for RTIO's regional FIFO programme with flights from Geraldton, Broome, Busselton and other regional centres that may be developed to supply staff for the West Pilbara.

Will this encourage international FIFO?

Although it is possible that a 737 sized aircraft could fly to Tom Price from south east Asia, the planned runway length would preclude a direct flight back to south east Asia.

There has been no decision to start international FIFO by RTIO.

Further, there are no plans in the new airport design for Customs and Immigration control. The agreed scope allows for domestic operation only.

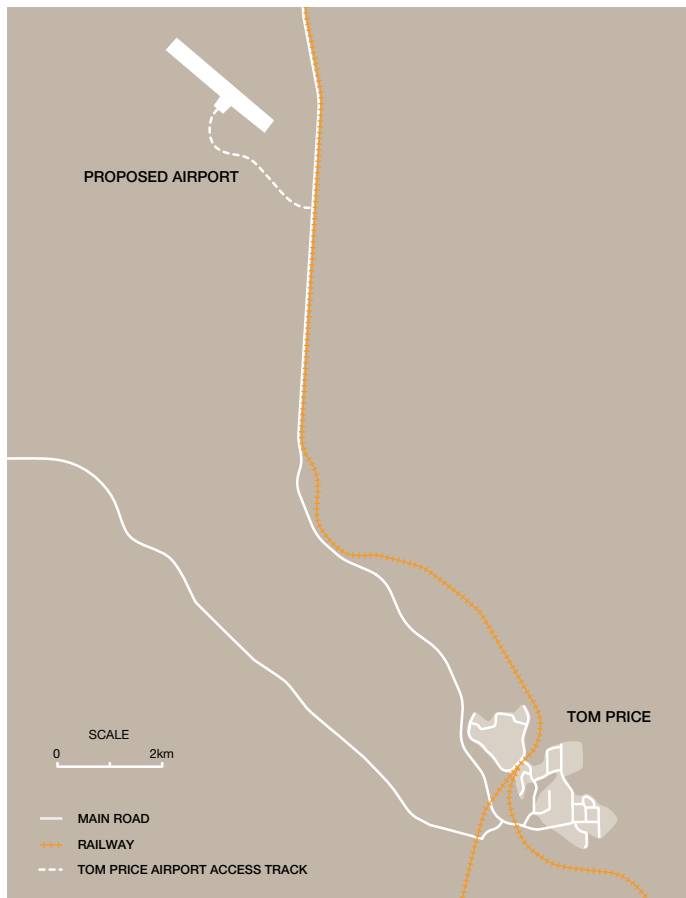
Is there scope for future upgrades/increased capacity?

Initially the airport will be designed to accept at least two B737 sized aircraft at a time.

Where possible, provision will be left in the airport design for later upgrades and increased capacity. These include possible extensions to the original runway length, car-park and terminal areas.

Will private jet and helicopter owners be able to use the airport?

Yes. A hard stand for general aviation aircraft has been included in the concept. Larger aircraft/jets would have a separate apron for parking.



The proposed airport location in relation to Tom Price town

If there is no airport at Brockman 4 how will these RTIO employees commute to and from site?

The airstrip location proposed at the Brockman 4 mine site has similar limitations to the existing Brockman 2 and West Angelas strips. Such a strip would be limited to smaller, slower, 'weight limited' aircraft and day time only arrivals and departures, compared to the commercial jets proposed for Tom Price Airport which would have a 24/7 capability. It is proposed that Brockman 4 employees would commute via the sealed 'white quartz' road, to the new airport. This would take approximately 60mins by bus, however the faster jet service should ensure that the overall commute time was comparable to and from Perth.

The central location of the new airport ensures the majority of FIFO employees would have similar commute conditions, with access to commercial jet transport, from a purpose built facility.

What will the terminal look like? Will it be energy/water efficient?

The terminal will be a purpose built facility with enough room to contain the full passenger complement for a flight. Security arrangements, waiting areas, car parks, bus terminals and other facilities will be appropriately integrated into the design.

As the airport will be a clean sheet design and developed as a 'gateway to Karijini National Park', there is opportunity to incorporate energy and water saving innovation into the design. Solar energy power, grey-water garden reticulation and evaporative air-conditioning are some of the 'green' innovations under consideration.

What facilities will be located at the terminal?

The terminal will be built to Australian Standards including latest security facilities. Hire car booths will be located inside the terminal.

Space will be allowed inside the terminal for a future café and tourist information booth, however these may not be initially in place at commissioning.

RTIO will engage with local and government stakeholders on the exact design of the terminal and the final design will be available for public comment.

Will the new airport increase noise and/or air pollution at Tom Price?

The airport will be located 18kms to the north of the town behind a ridge line. Access will be via a sealed road so dust should not be an issue.

A noise survey will be included as part of the Feasibility Study. However, noise at Tom Price is not expected to be any greater than that currently experienced at Paraburdoo.

Will the new airport disturb any archaeological or culturally sensitive sites?

The proposed airport location is in an area not containing any iron ore deposits and thus has never previously been surveyed for archaeology or cultural sensitivity. Initial heritage surveys have discovered some scatter sites at the location. Anthropological surveys are ongoing. None of the identified sites will be disturbed without first gaining all appropriate internal and external approvals.

It has been suggested that (if appropriate agreements are in place), a Traditional Owner information / presentation bay may be developed in the terminal containing any artefacts found on the site.

Will the new airport cause any environmental degradation and how will it be managed?

The construction area will need to be cleared of vegetation and some cut/fill will need to occur. Full environmental baseline studies and Government approval submissions will form part of the Feasibility Study. No significant flora or fauna species have been discovered to date.

Will Tom Price's weather patterns (ie cyclones, cloud cover) disrupt the reliability and delivery of airline services?

Yes but no more than the current weather related disruptions experienced at Paraburdoo Airport.

The location of the proposed Tom Price Airport has been sited to minimise the number of river crossings from the surrounding RTIO operations and maximise access via sealed (all weather) roads.

Will the airport be visible from the main road?

The terminal will be some 2kms west of the Tom Price/Karratha Road, accessed via a sealed road. Until a final design is approved we do not know if the building will be visible from the main road.

Depending on the final length of the runway, this may come within a few hundred metres of the Tom Price/Karratha Road and is expected to be visible.

The flight path (any take off and landing) to the east of the runway would fly over the Tom Price / Karratha Road. Anyone travelling on the road at the time will see the aircraft.

What happens when mining in the region finishes?

The airport will remain in place, hopefully as an ongoing and sustainable facility for Tom Price and the Pilbara. As mining is planned to continue in the West Pilbara for another 30 years, it is reasonable to expect that the new airport will stimulate the fly-in tourist business and could provide the basis of regular flights after mining has ended.

Paraburdoo Airport

What will happen to the Paraburdoo Airport?

If the Tom Price Airport is built, the current thinking is that the Paraburdoo Airport will be retained however, regular jet services will cease. Facilities will be reduced to care and maintenance levels and the airstrip would remain open to general aviation aircraft however more work needs to be done to clarify any risks associated with this approach.

What will happen to the employees and service providers?

Paraburdoo Airport employees and service providers will be consulted as part of the Feasibility Study. If the Tom Price Airport is built, a transition plan will be prepared to move services from Paraburdoo to Tom Price.

Will there be a regular bus service between Paraburdoo and the new airport?

It is probable that a regular bus service will operate between Paraburdoo town and Tom Price Airport as is currently provided between Tom Price and Paraburdoo Airport. This will be investigated and answered as part of the Feasibility Study.

What happens to private jet and helicopter owners currently housed at Paraburdoo Airport?

Paraburdoo Airport will remain in place in a state of care and maintenance. Minimum services for GA and VFR flight would probably remain, with flight procedures conducted as for private strips. This is an important question which will be evaluated as part of the Feasibility Study.