

"GET ARMY TO BUILD DORNOCH AIR-STRIP"

The Army in Scotland is looking for an air-strip to construct next year as part of a training programme — and Col. Allan Gilmour thinks that an extension to Dornoch Links aerodrome is their answer.

But yesterday he had the job of convincing Highland Region's road and transport committee that it was a good idea, despite opposition from that department and regional developers who feel there is no demand for air travel to and from Dornoch.

Col. Gilmour, regional councillor for Dornoch and Creich, argued that air-strips on Skye and Mull were built before they created a demand which justified them.

And he answered criticism that the Region had other military-aided schemes of greater priority with the counter-attack that if the Army air-field unit could not find an exercise in the Highlands, they would go somewhere else. They were not road or bridge builders.

Earlier this week, Col. Gilmour said that coach contractor John Gordon, of Dornoch, was already uplifting Belgian holidaymakers who had flown into Wick Airport for a holiday in Sutherland.

"If we had a strip in Dornoch, they could fly in here directly," he said. "And if it became known that Dornoch had the capability of handling light passenger aircraft, who knows what sort of holidays could be arranged taking in golf and all other sports?"

He said he also understood that the H.I.D.B. had dis-

cretionary powers to grant aid for the construction of air-strips.

Mr Peter Mackintosh, director of development at Inverness, recently told Mr Ian Telfer, secretary of Sutherland's local development group, that neither his department nor roads and transport could find grounds for recommending progress on an extension to Dornoch aerodrome.

"The case for extension is a speculative one," he wrote. "It is understood that, for example, medium sized piston aircraft such as the Bandeirante are able to use the present airstrip with either a full passenger load, or full fuel tanks, but not both.

"If therefore, demand existed for increased business or tourist use, air operators could demonstrate this now by the simple expedient of refuelling at Inverness, Aberdeen or Glasgow.

"Contact with various air operators does not elicit the response that extension of Dornoch airstrip is justified at the moment. The additional use of Dornoch for fixed wing/helicopter transfers to Moray Firth oil rigs is unlikely, in view of the existence of adequate facilities at Dalcross, Wick and Aberdeen already in use as transit points.

"As far as Opmac schemes are concerned, the roads and transport department have other projects programmed for which a less speculative need is foreseen. The development department will not consider the case for extension of the air-strip sufficiently demonstrated to merit cancellation of, for example,

factory building projects already agreed."

Since that letter was written, Col. Gilmour has received a telephone call from Lieut.-Col. Maclean, head of the Royal Engineers at Army headquarters in Edinburgh, that a unit was looking for air-field construction training next year.

Writing to Highland Region, Col. Gilmour said: "Col. Maclean does not particularly wish to get involved in design, unless there is a reasonable chance of the regional council accepting the offer to construct.

"The overall cost to the authority cannot be worked out until after the design study. He has asked if the regional council could clear this with him before the end of September.

"I agree that the extension of Dornoch aerodrome is a speculative case. I also agree that the roads and transport department have other less speculative projects programmed.

"If the full cost by several contractors was to come from the council's revenue budget, then there is really no case for Dornoch at all. With Opmac schemes this situation is entirely different.

"The regional council have agreed priorities for all projects based largely on need and value for money. The Army also have priorities for schemes in aid of the community. These are based solely on value for operational training. Another factor is that, even if a scheme is agreed as good training, a unit has to be found which wishes to do that particular job in that particular place.

"If the council therefore have a list of possible tasks registered as good training value by the Army, there is no real guarantee that the ones with the highest council priority will be done first, or that they will ever be done.

"For example, if a unit requires to build an air-strip and the council says 'no, but can you do another task, say a bridge instead?' then that unit will go and find another place to build an air-strip."

Col. Gilmour said he believed the policy of the previous regional council had been to have a lump sum in their budget and to list schemes and accept the Army's offer to do any one of them. If no Army unit came forward, then the sum was transferred to a normal contractual job as slippage.

Col. Gilmour said he believed this was good policy. No money was wasted, and there was a chance of getting a job which would never be done otherwise, done for about a tenth of the cost by a civil contractor.

He pointed out that it was in this way that the first Highland Regional Council had achieved the River Oykel crossing, and since then some six smaller jobs had been done in Sutherland, with the cost being met by the district council or the Unadopted Roads Fund.

Col. Gilmour pressed that the council should adopt the old system of setting aside money for Army schemes in general and to tell the Royal Engineers that there was a likelihood of the acceptance of the offer by the Army to construct the Dornoch air-strip extension.

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