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German airship company sets up shop in Winnipeg

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By Geoff Kirbyson

A German airship firm has opened a Winnipeg office to help develop "lighter-than-air" opportunities in the Canadian market.

Carl von Gablenz, CEO of CargoLifter Airship Company, said Canada is one of the largest markets in the world for the still-developing airship industry. In Manitoba, in particular, there is little transportation infrastructure to service communities in the northern part of the province.

"Helicopters are limited in their lift capacity. We think providing logistics for lighter-than-air applications could be a very efficient and an environmentally friendly tool," von Gablenz said, noting the company's office will be located at the University of Manitoba's SmartPark.

But the opportunities in the industry involve more than just long-haul transportation, von Gablenz said. The technology could also be used as on-site cranes for construction or to ferry goods or equipment across a river, he said.

"You can bridge the river at the time when it's not frozen," he said.

Von Gablenz was in Winnipeg yesterday to meet government and industry officials.

Tomorrow, he's speaking at the Mid-Canada Industry and Business Conference in Thompson.

Barry Prentice, professor of supply chain management at the University of Manitoba's I.H. Asper School of Management and a longtime airship industry advocate, said it's getting closer to becoming a viable sector all the time. Airships have been touted at conferences and other events in Winnipeg for a number of years.

Prentice said they could be used in the pipeline, mining, hydro and energy sectors.

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