6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & INVESTMENT READINESS

Communities evaluating aviation-related opportunities often encounter bold claims about jobs, economic growth, tax revenue, workforce development, business attraction, and regional competitiveness. These claims may come from operators, manufacturers, consultants, investors, economic development organizations, public agencies, or economic impact studies.

Some of these claims are on solid ground and well supported, while others may be speculative. Most fall somewhere in between.

Economic development planning provides a useful framework for evaluating these opportunities. Rather than beginning with forecasts, economic development practitioners typically begin by understanding local conditions, competitive advantages, constraints, workforce capacity, infrastructure readiness, and implementation capability. The goal is not simply to identify opportunities. The goal is to determine whether those opportunities can be successfully pursued.

This distinction is particularly important for Advanced Air Mobility, Regional Air Mobility, electric aviation, unmanned aircraft systems, and related industries. Aviation may align with a community's economic goals, transportation needs, workforce priorities, tourism assets, logistics strengths, or industrial development objectives. Alignment alone, however, does not demonstrate readiness.

Readiness is best understood as a process of reducing uncertainty and risk. Communities become more prepared for investment when they understand their assets, constraints, implementation requirements, and market conditions. This perspective shifts the conversation away from broad claims about future benefits and toward the evidence needed to support sound decision-making.

6.1 Economic Potential Is Not Readiness

Economic potential and readiness are often discussed as though they are the same thing. In practice, they are very different.

Economic potential refers to the value that could be created if a particular opportunity succeeds. A community located near a major recreation destination may have potential for tourism-related aviation services. A region with strong manufacturing capabilities may have potential to support aerospace production. An airport with available land and good transportation access may have potential to support logistics activity or aviation-related development. Potential identifies what may be possible.

Readiness evaluates whether the conditions necessary for success are already present or can realistically be created.

Economic development literature emphasizes this distinction. Leigh argues that local economic development planning should begin with an assessment of local conditions, competitive advantages, constraints, and implementation capacity rather than with a preferred project or recruitment target (Leigh 2025). For aviation, this means a community should not treat interest from an operator, manufacturer, developer, or state initiative as proof of readiness. The question is whether the local conditions needed for success are present or realistically buildable.

This distinction helps explain why communities with similar assets often experience very different outcomes. Two communities may both have airports, available land, tourism assets, or industrial areas. One may possess the workforce, infrastructure, partnerships, and implementation capacity needed to support aviation-related investment. The other may not.

The same principle applies to aviation opportunities. A proposed vertiport, logistics facility, manufacturing operation, maintenance center, tourism service, or Regional Air Mobility route may appear attractive on paper. The relevant planning question is not whether the opportunity sounds promising. The relevant question is whether the conditions necessary to support the opportunity are present.

Several Utah planning themes illustrate this point. Regional economic development strategies repeatedly emphasize workforce development, economic diversification, infrastructure readiness, industrial land availability, housing affordability, transportation access, and regional competitiveness. These plans are not focused on aviation specifically. They are focused on the conditions that allow economic opportunities to become successful projects.

This distinction is particularly useful when evaluating economic forecasts. Forecasts often describe what may happen if an industry grows successfully. Readiness evaluates whether the community has the ability to support that growth. The two are related, but they are not interchangeable.

A useful planning habit is to ask a simple question:
What evidence would demonstrate that this opportunity is ready to move forward?

If potential and readiness are not the same thing, communities need a way to evaluate readiness more systematically.

6.2 The Four-Part Viability Test

Many economic development frameworks evaluate opportunities through a series of viability tests. While terminology varies across organizations and disciplines, the underlying principle remains consistent: successful projects must satisfy more than a single criterion.

One useful framework evaluates projects through four dimensions:

- Community viability
- Locational viability
- Commercial viability
- Implementation viability

Together, these dimensions provide a structured way to assess whether an opportunity is aligned with local goals, physically feasible, economically plausible, and realistically deliverable. This approach reflects basic economic development practice: projects are strongest when they connect to local assets, market realities, infrastructure capacity, workforce conditions, and public implementation capability rather than relying only on projected benefits (Leigh 2025).

Community Viability

Community viability asks whether an opportunity aligns with local needs, priorities, and adopted plans.

Aviation may support a variety of local goals, including economic diversification, emergency response, healthcare access, workforce development, logistics, tourism, transportation access, or industrial development. Not every opportunity supports every goal. Community viability requires understanding whether the proposed activity advances priorities that the community has already identified through planning and public processes.

Questions of community viability are often addressed through comprehensive plans, airport plans, transportation plans, Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS), hazard mitigation plans, workforce strategies, and economic development plans.

Locational Viability

Locational viability evaluates whether the physical location can support the proposed activity.

This includes site characteristics, transportation access, utility availability, environmental constraints, land-use compatibility, airport compatibility, infrastructure capacity, and development feasibility.

The previous section explored many of these issues in detail. A location may appear attractive because of available land or airport access, while still facing significant constraints related to utilities, environmental conditions, incompatible surrounding land uses, or limited transportation connectivity.

Site selectors, industrial developers, airport planners, and infrastructure agencies routinely evaluate projects through this lens because location-related constraints often determine whether a project can move beyond the concept stage.

Commercial Viability

Commercial viability asks whether sufficient demand exists to support the activity.

This question is often overlooked in discussions about emerging technologies. The existence of a technology does not automatically create a market. Commercial viability may involve passenger demand, freight demand, tourism demand, maintenance demand, manufacturing demand, public-service demand, or some combination of these factors. Different use cases require different market evidence.

This is particularly important for aviation. Passenger mobility, cargo logistics, emergency response, tourism access, infrastructure inspection, manufacturing, maintenance, and workforce training all operate under different economic assumptions. A use case that is commercially viable in one region may not be viable in another.

Implementation Viability

Implementation viability evaluates whether the project can actually be delivered. A project may align with community goals, have a suitable location, and demonstrate market demand while still failing because the sponsoring organizations lack the resources, partnerships, authority, funding, staffing, or institutional capacity needed to execute it.

Implementation viability often receives less attention than market forecasts, but it frequently determines whether projects move from concept to reality.

Key considerations may include:

- Sponsor/Proponent capability
- Partner commitments
- Funding sources
- Regulatory pathways
- Workforce availability
- Project management capacity
- Operations and maintenance requirements
- Long-term organizational responsibilities

Many projects fail not because the opportunity was flawed, but because implementation requirements were underestimated.

Taken together, these four dimensions provide a practical framework for evaluating aviation-related opportunities. They encourage communities to look beyond enthusiasm, forecasts, or marketing materials and focus instead on the conditions that support successful implementation.

The strongest opportunities typically perform well across all four dimensions. They align with community priorities, fit the physical location, demonstrate credible demand, and have a realistic path to implementation.

6.3 Workforce as Infrastructure

Workforce is often discussed as a benefit of economic development. New industries create jobs, businesses hire workers, and local economies grow. While this perspective is useful, it can also obscure an important reality: workforce is frequently one of the conditions that makes economic development possible in the first place.

Economic development organizations, site selectors, and private employers routinely evaluate workforce availability before making investment decisions. Access to skilled labor often ranks alongside utilities, transportation access, land availability, and regulatory certainty as a primary site-selection factor. A community may possess available land, transportation infrastructure, and strong market demand, but still struggle to attract investment if employers are unable to find the workforce needed to support operations.

This principle is particularly relevant to aviation. Discussions about Advanced Air Mobility often focus on aircraft, infrastructure, and operations. Less attention is sometimes given to the workforce required to design, build, maintain, operate, inspect, regulate, and support those systems.

The Utah Advanced Air Mobility Economic Impact Analysis highlights the importance of expanding vocational training, apprenticeships, and technical education pathways to support future aviation activity. Utah stakeholder comments reinforce the same point. Aviation and AAM were repeatedly framed not only as transportation technologies, but as ways to inspire students, build technical career pathways, and connect Utah's education and workforce systems to emerging aerospace opportunities (UDOT Division of Aeronautics 2025). This workforce extends well beyond pilots and engineers. It may include aircraft maintenance technicians, avionics specialists, electricians, battery technicians, composite manufacturing workers, dispatch personnel, logistics professionals, software developers, public safety personnel, and a wide range of supporting occupations.

This broader view of workforce creates opportunities for communities that may never host large-scale aviation infrastructure. A community does not need a vertiport, manufacturing facility, or major airport expansion project to participate in the aviation economy. It may contribute through workforce development, technical education, apprenticeships, maintenance capabilities, specialized manufacturing, or supporting services that connect to a larger regional ecosystem.

Several Utah planning and economic development strategies reinforce this concept. Workforce development, technical education, apprenticeship programs, and industry partnerships consistently appear as priorities across urban and rural regions. Many communities are focused on retaining local talent, creating career pathways, and expanding opportunities for young

residents who might otherwise leave in search of employment elsewhere. Aviation-related industries may support these objectives when workforce investments are aligned with actual employer demand and regional economic conditions.

Workforce planning also creates a useful reality check when evaluating economic forecasts. A proposal may project substantial job growth, but communities should still ask whether the workforce required to support those jobs exists today, can be trained locally, or would need to be recruited from elsewhere. In some cases, workforce limitations may become a greater constraint than infrastructure, land, or capital.

For this reason, workforce should be viewed as a form of infrastructure. Like utilities, transportation systems, and communications networks, workforce capacity takes time to build. Communities interested in aviation-related economic development may therefore benefit from evaluating workforce readiness alongside physical infrastructure readiness in earlier phases of inquiry. Questions about talent pipelines, training providers, employer partnerships, technical programs, and workforce retention may be just as important as questions about airports, utilities, or available land.

6.4 Airport Districts, Logistics, Tourism, and Clusters

Economic development is often strongest when it builds from existing assets and related industries. Communities do not have to treat aviation as a standalone sector to understand its economic potential. Aviation-related activity often connects to industries that may already exist in a region, including aerospace, defense, advanced manufacturing, logistics, tourism, emergency services, public safety, software, and technical training.

This is where cluster thinking is useful. Economic development literature commonly evaluates whether a region has concentrations of related firms, suppliers, workers, institutions, and infrastructure that can support an industry over time. A single company may create value, but durable economic development is more likely when that company fits within a broader ecosystem of employers, training providers, suppliers, customers, public agencies, and supporting infrastructure.

Utah has several existing economic foundations that may be relevant to aviation-related development. The state has a significant aerospace and defense presence, advanced manufacturing capacity, logistics and freight corridors, inland port project areas, universities and technical education providers, military and commercial aviation assets, and recreation-based gateway economies. These assets do not mean every community is ready for aviation-related investment. They do suggest that some communities may already have pieces of the ecosystem needed to participate in the new emerging aviation economy.

Airport districts and airport-adjacent areas may be especially important in this context. UDOT's Airports as Connected Activity Centers research notes that airport authorities are increasingly understood as "full-fledged economic actors," not merely transportation suppliers (McKee Miller

et al. 2022, 88). From an economic development perspective, airport districts may support business formation, workforce training, maintenance activity, logistics operations, emergency response, specialized manufacturing, and visitor-serving activity when those uses fit the airport's role and surrounding land-use context.

The Utah Inland Port Authority project areas are one example of how logistics, industrial development, freight movement, and infrastructure planning may intersect with aviation-related opportunities. Some inland port planning materials already contemplate advanced logistics, vertiport concepts, or aviation-supporting activity near industrial and freight assets. These examples do not establish a statewide instruction to pursue aviation infrastructure, but they do show where aviation may align with existing logistics and industrial development strategies.

Tourism and recreation create a different kind of economic connection. Many Utah airports serve as gateways to national parks, ski destinations, public lands, hunting areas, recreation economies, and rural communities. Aviation may support these economies through visitor access, outfitter services, hospitality, emergency response, aircraft services, ground transportation connections, or airport-adjacent destination development. The economic question is not only whether visitors can arrive by air. It is whether the airport and surrounding community are prepared to capture value from that access in ways that support local goals.

This gateway function is already reflected in Utah aviation planning. The Utah Aviation Development Strategy identifies airports serving recreation and community access roles and recognizes that some airports function as gateways to national parks, public lands, ski destinations, and other recreation assets (UDOT Division of Aeronautics 2023). For smaller communities, that economic role may be more realistic and useful than pursuing a large-scale aviation district.

For gateway communities, the economic question should also include leakage. Aviation access may increase visitor volume or improve the visitor experience, but those benefits do not automatically stay in the local economy. Communities should consider whether aviation-related services help visitors spend money locally, use local outfitters, stay overnight, purchase supplies, or connect with local businesses rather than simply moving through the community more quickly. Utah's aviation planning includes examples of airports connecting rural industries to broader markets, including agricultural logistics activity at Manti-Ephraim Airport. These examples show that aviation economic value can be modest in scale but meaningful when it connects directly to local industry and regional market access (UDOT Division of Aeronautics 2023).

This distinction is important for rural and gateway communities. Aviation-related economic development may not look like a large manufacturing plant or major passenger mobility service. It may look like better airport access, targeted services for high-value, high-spending visitors, maintenance activity, logistics support, public safety aviation, training programs, or small businesses that serve aviation-linked markets. These uses may be modest in scale but

meaningful in communities seeking diversification, youth retention, year-round employment, or stronger connections to regional markets.

Cluster development also provides a useful check against overpromising. A community should not assume that an aviation-related opportunity will create a new economic ecosystem from scratch. Stronger opportunities usually connect to existing strengths, such as workforce skills, supplier networks, transportation access, airport assets, tourism demand, logistics corridors, or institutional partners. Where those foundations are weak, the community may still have potential, but readiness will require more deliberate capacity building.

The practical planning task is to identify where aviation fits within the local and regional economy. For some communities, that fit may be logistics. For others, it may be tourism, workforce training, emergency response, manufacturing, maintenance, or airport district development. The strongest opportunities will connect aviation to economic activity that is already present, already planned, or realistically buildable.

6.5 Evaluating Economic Impact Claims

Economic impact studies can be useful planning tools. They can help communities understand potential job creation, business activity, tax revenue, infrastructure needs, workforce requirements, and broader economic relationships. They can also help public agencies compare scenarios, identify assumptions, and understand how different use cases may affect different parts of the economy. However, they should not be treated as guarantees.

Economic forecasts are conditional projections. They estimate what may happen if a set of assumptions proves accurate. Therefore, economic impact models are not evidence that a project is feasible. They estimate outcomes if assumptions about demand, investment, operations, supply chains, workforce, and implementation prove correct. Those assumptions may involve uncertain aircraft certification timelines, infrastructure delivery, operator participation, passenger demand, cargo demand, automation, workforce availability, energy costs, construction costs, regulatory approvals, and public acceptance. If those assumptions change, the forecast changes with them.

A review of AAM economic impact studies from Ohio, Arkansas, Virginia, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Utah shows that the field is maturing. Earlier studies often functioned as “ingredient lists,” identifying the major components of an AAM ecosystem, including aircraft, vertiports, ground infrastructure, traffic management, operators, and manufacturing. Later studies added more detailed geospatial analysis, localized use cases, business-case modeling, implementation phasing, and scenario-based approaches. Kansas took a different path by using dynamic scenario modeling to examine how outcomes may change under different adoption, labor, and market conditions. The lesson is not that one state’s model should be copied, but that economic claims should be evaluated against the assumptions and constraints that shape them.

This caution is especially important for emerging industries. Traditional economic models often rely on historical industry relationships, supply chains, and spending patterns. For AAM, many of those relationships are still forming. Workforce needs, supplier networks, infrastructure costs, regulatory timelines, passenger behavior, and operator business models may change as the industry matures.

For Utah communities, this means looking carefully at what an economic study is really saying. A study may estimate the economic activity associated with a mature AAM ecosystem, but the local community still needs evidence that the supporting conditions are present. That evidence may include trained workers, electrical infrastructure, airport or site infrastructure, public-sector coordination capacity, demonstrated user demand, and use cases that match the local economy.

Communities should also distinguish between direct, indirect, and induced impacts. Direct impacts are tied most closely to the activity being evaluated, such as construction, operations, maintenance, manufacturing, logistics, or aviation services. Indirect impacts reflect supplier and business-to-business activity. Induced impacts reflect household spending by workers whose income is connected to the activity. All three categories may be useful, but they do not carry the same meaning for local planning decisions.

This distinction is especially important when discussing job creation. A forecast may identify a large number of total jobs, but communities should understand how many are direct aviation or infrastructure jobs, how many are supplier jobs, how many are induced jobs, and how many depend on assumptions about future automation, manufacturing location, passenger adoption, or private investment.

Economic impact studies should therefore be read as decision-support tools, among other tools. They can help identify potential scale, likely dependencies, and useful comparisons. They cannot answer every question about readiness, feasibility, public value, or implementation capacity.

The practical review task is to identify what assumptions would need to be true for the forecast to become reality.

That question helps communities use economic studies without being captured by them. It also reinforces the central theme of this section: economic potential, readiness, implementation capacity, and viability must be evaluated together.

6.6 Public Investment, Opportunity Cost, and Resilience

Economic potential does not automatically justify public investment. Public agencies may support aviation-related activity through planning, staff time, infrastructure coordination, land-use review, utility planning, airport investment, incentives, partnerships, or direct funding. Each of these commitments carries an opportunity cost.

Opportunity cost is the value of what a community gives up when it chooses one use of public attention or resources over another. A dollar, staff hour, parcel, grant application, capital project, or utility upgrade directed toward an aviation-related opportunity is not available for another public purpose during that same period. This does not mean aviation-related investment is inappropriate. It means the public rationale should be clear.

For communities, the public investment question is different from the private business case. A private operator may evaluate whether a route, facility, aircraft, or logistics service can generate revenue. A public agency must evaluate whether its role is justified by public value, strategic alignment, risk reduction, resilience, or long-term community benefit. Utah stakeholder feedback reinforces this distinction, with state officials emphasizing that public agencies should be cautious about taxpayer exposure and should distinguish planning, coordination, and regulatory roles from private-sector capital risk (UDOT Division of Aeronautics 2025).

In some cases, that public value may be direct. Aviation may support emergency medical logistics, wildfire response, search and rescue, disaster recovery, airport access, workforce training, or critical supply movement. In other cases, public value may be indirect or enabling, such as supporting economic diversification, strengthening an airport district, improving regional connectivity, or preparing infrastructure that serves multiple future uses.

Resilience is one of the strongest public-value arguments for aviation-related investment. Utah communities face risks related to wildfire, winter weather, seismic events, flooding, canyon and mountain corridor disruptions, long rural distances, and supply-chain interruptions. Aviation may provide redundancy when surface systems are constrained or disrupted, especially for emergency response, medical logistics, damage assessment, public safety, and time-sensitive supplies. Airports demonstrate this capacity today, and future vertiports should be explored, not just as commercial air mobility nodes, but also as critical resilience infrastructure.

Economic resilience is also relevant. Communities that depend heavily on a single industry, seasonal tourism, extraction activity, or a narrow employment base often seek new ways to diversify. Aviation-related investment may support resilience when it connects to broader strategies for workforce development, logistics, manufacturing, public safety, tourism management, or regional access. It is less defensible when it relies only on speculative passenger markets, unverified demand, or branding value.

Public investment decisions should therefore consider both benefits and tradeoffs. A proposal that appears promising may still require too much public subsidy, create high operating obligations, compete with higher-priority infrastructure needs, or depend on assumptions that are not yet credible. Another proposal may be modest in scale but strongly aligned with emergency response, workforce development, airport modernization, or critical logistics.

The readiness framework developed in this section helps communities make those distinctions. Public agencies do not need to reject aviation-related opportunities simply because they involve

uncertainty. They also should not commit public resources based only on economic impact projections or private-sector interest. The stronger approach is to evaluate whether the opportunity has a public purpose, whether readiness conditions are present, whether implementation capacity exists, and whether the expected benefits justify the public role.

Public investment is most defensible when aviation-related activity advances adopted community goals, reduces risk, supports resilient systems, fills a documented gap, and creates value beyond the private operator or developer. That standard gives communities room to support meaningful aviation opportunities while avoiding premature commitments to projects that are not yet ready.

6.7 Readiness as a Toolkit Practice

Readiness should not be treated as a one-time designation. It is better understood as a planning practice that helps communities identify where they are, what evidence they have, what gaps remain, and what level of action is appropriate.

A community may be ready to monitor an aviation-related opportunity without being ready to pursue a project. It may be ready to coordinate with an airport sponsor or utility provider without being ready to make a capital investment. It may be ready to evaluate a workforce strategy without being ready to recruit an operator. Readiness exists in stages, and those stages should guide the public response.

A practical readiness framework can help communities avoid two common mistakes. The first is dismissing an opportunity too early because it is unfamiliar or incomplete. The second is moving too quickly from interest to commitment before the basic evidence has been gathered. A staged approach gives communities room to learn, coordinate, prepare, and act at the right level.

For aviation-related opportunities, readiness can be evaluated across several categories, including strategic fit, market or user demand, aviation and airport compatibility, site control, land use, buildability, infrastructure and utilities, transportation and logistics integration, environmental and permitting conditions, workforce and cluster strength, governance and partner capacity, financial sustainability, community legitimacy, and data quality.

Not every category will apply equally to every use case. A public safety drone program, airport charging project, regional cargo route, maintenance facility, tourism service, vertiport proposal, or manufacturing recruitment effort will each require different evidence. The value of a common readiness framework is that it helps communities ask disciplined questions before selecting tools, pursuing grants, negotiating with operators, or changing local policy.

A simple maturity scale may be useful for future toolkit tools, but scoring should not be the first step. Communities should first identify whether any fatal flaws would prevent the concept from moving forward under current conditions.

Those fatal flaws may include lack of site control, incompatible zoning, unavailable utilities, unresolved environmental constraints, lack of sponsor authority, grant ineligibility, no credible user demand, insufficient workforce capacity, or inadequate operations and maintenance capability. If one of those issues is present, the concept may still have long-term potential, but it should be treated as a planning or predevelopment issue rather than an implementation-ready opportunity.

This section does not create a formal readiness scorecard. That level of detail belongs in a toolkit worksheet or resource directory item. It does, however, introduce the planning discipline behind such a tool: readiness should be evidence-based, phased, and connected to the level of public action being considered.

For communities, the practical takeaway is straightforward. Aviation-related economic potential deserves attention when it aligns with local goals and regional strengths. It deserves stronger action when readiness conditions are documented, implementation capacity is credible, and public value is clear.

The next section turns from readiness to governance. If communities are going to monitor, prepare for, or act on aviation-related opportunities, they also need to understand who has authority, who needs to coordinate, and where local roles begin and end.

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