

2. NEEDS-FIRST PLANNING

Communities should not begin Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) conversations about aircraft. For public agencies, the better starting point is much more practical: what is the community already trying to solve?

Across Utah, communities and regions are already working on resilience, access to services, freight movement, workforce development, economic diversification, emergency response, growth management, housing, airport compatibility, and community character. These priorities show up in general plans, regional transportation plans, airport plans, freight plans, comprehensive economic development strategies, hazard mitigation plans, transit plans, and capital improvement programs. They are the work already in front of cities, counties, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), Association of Governments (AOGs), airport sponsors, emergency managers, economic development organizations, utilities, and state agencies.

AAM, unmanned aerial systems (UAS), Regional Air Mobility (RAM), electric aviation, airport modernization, and related infrastructure should be evaluated against those priorities. The question is not what aircraft are coming. The question is whether aviation is part of the right response.

That is the purpose of needs-first planning.

Start With the Work Communities Are Already Doing

Most communities are not asking for AAM as a standalone goal. They are asking how to improve emergency response, protect access during disruptions, move goods more efficiently, connect rural areas to regional services, retain workforce, diversify local economies, protect airports, manage growth, preserve community character, and make better use of limited public resources.

Aviation may help with some of those priorities, while having little to offer for others. The value of this toolkit is not in telling every community to pursue AAM for the sake of embracing technology. Its value is first in helping communities determine where aviation belongs in the work they are already doing.

This distinction is important for both public agencies and industry. For local governments, it keeps the conversation tied to adopted plans, public value, and implementation capacity. For operators, manufacturers, infrastructure developers, and service providers, it clarifies what communities are likely to care about. A proposal is more likely to receive serious public-sector attention when it helps solve a recognized community problem rather than simply introducing a new technology.

A drone logistics proposal, for example, can be evaluated in relation to freight demand, local truck impacts, land use compatibility, access to customers, site circulation, noise, public safety, and utility needs. A regional passenger service can be evaluated in relation to airport access, rural connectivity, travel time, demand, reliability, affordability, and whether it improves access to jobs, services, or regional centers. A vertiport proposal can be evaluated in relation to land use, emergency access, surface transportation, utilities, airport or heliport compatibility, community impacts, and long-term public value.

For communities, the aircraft matters, but it is not the starting point. Understanding local need comes first, then fit, then aspiration.

What Needs-First Planning Means

Needs-first planning treats aviation as a tool, not the end goal. A community does not build a road simply because the technology to do so exists. It builds or improves a road because there is a tangible need for mobility, safety, access, freight, economic development, or land-use intervention. A community does not expand transit simply because vehicles are available. It does so because people need better access to jobs, education, housing, healthcare, or services.

AAM should be evaluated similarly. A needs-first approach helps communities ask better questions early:

- What community or regional priority does this relate to?
- What problem is being solved?
- Who benefits?
- Who is affected?
- Is aviation a practical tool for this need?
- What public role is justified?
- What level of action is appropriate now?

Those questions are not intended to slow the conversation down. They are intended to make the conversation useful.

Public Value First

Public value gives communities a clear way to evaluate aviation proposals without reducing every decision to either enthusiasm or skepticism. It asks whether an aviation-related activity helps advance a recognized community priority, supports responsible implementation, and justifies the public role being requested.

AAM will attract interest from private companies, developers, operators, investors, airports, state agencies, and local governments. That interest can be useful by revealing emerging markets, new services, infrastructure needs, workforce opportunities, and economic development

potential. Public agencies can use that activity as information, then evaluate how the proposal fits local and regional plans, public responsibilities, land-use conditions, and community goals.

Public value can be direct, indirect, or enabling. Direct public value may include emergency response, medical logistics, wildfire monitoring, infrastructure inspection, or critical supply movement. Indirect public value may include airport-based jobs, workforce training, local spending, business attraction, freight efficiency, tax base growth, or safer working conditions. Enabling public value may come from the role an airport or aviation service plays in helping an employer, medical provider, contractor, supplier, or investor reach a community and remain active there.

This is especially important for rural and smaller communities. A flight arriving at a local airport may look like private convenience from the outside. In some cases, that aircraft may be carrying an employer, investor, specialist, contractor, medical professional, or business owner whose access to the community helps support local jobs and services. The public value is not only the flight. It may be the employment, services, spending, and economic activity that aviation helps make possible.

A needs-first approach helps communities look at the full chain of benefits and impacts. Does the aviation activity help retain employers? Does it support workforce pathways? Does it improve access to services? Does it strengthen rural economic resilience? Does it help keep families rooted in the community by expanding the kinds of opportunities available locally? Does it support emergency response, logistics, airport utility, or regional access?

The public-value question is simple enough to remember, but strong enough to guide decisions: Who benefits, who is affected, what problem is solved, and what public role is justified?

Access Means More Than Riding in an Aircraft

Access is often discussed through the lens of passenger access: who can ride, where they can go, and what the trip costs. That remains important, especially for regional passenger mobility and airport connections. For planning purposes, access should also include the broader ways aviation can help people, businesses, and public agencies reach what they need.

A community may benefit from aviation when medical supplies move faster, emergency responders gain better information, infrastructure inspections become safer, freight systems become more flexible, rural residents gain stronger regional connections, airports support new jobs, or local businesses gain better access to customers and suppliers. These benefits may reach people who never personally use an AAM passenger service.

This broader access frame fits Utah well. Some communities may eventually evaluate passenger air mobility. Others may focus on emergency response, logistics, airport modernization, workforce development, rural access, or economic diversification. Some may

simply need to understand how state policy, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) guidance, nearby airport activity, or private-sector proposals could affect future planning decisions.

Aviation access should therefore be evaluated through outcomes. Does aviation improve access to care, services, jobs, goods, emergency response, or regional opportunity? Does it strengthen a community's ability to function during disruption? Does it help existing airports, transportation systems, or economic development areas serve the public more effectively? Does it create pathways for local residents to participate in the jobs, training, services, or business activity that aviation can support?

This is a more useful planning test than asking whether a community supports AAM in general. It shifts the conversation from technology preference to community benefit.

Where Aviation May Fit Utah's Existing Priorities

Utah's planning context gives communities several practical places to evaluate aviation. These examples show how a needs-first approach can connect aviation to the work communities are already doing.

Emergency response and resilience are among the clearest areas of alignment. Utah's terrain, wildfire exposure, seismic risk, winter weather, rural distances, and constrained corridors all place pressure on emergency planning. UAS may support situational awareness, damage assessment, wildfire monitoring, search and rescue, and delivery of small critical supplies. Other aviation services may support emergency logistics, medical movement, or response coordination where surface access is limited or disrupted.

Freight and logistics also deserve attention. Utah's freight system is growing, and many communities are working through truck traffic, industrial access, air quality, safety, and last-mile impacts. UAS and other cargo-oriented aviation services may support targeted logistics missions where time sensitivity, geography, security, or access constraints make surface options less effective. These services fit best when evaluated as part of broader freight, land-use, and economic development strategies.

Rural connectivity creates another strong planning connection. Some rural communities face long distances to specialized medical care, higher education, major employment centers, commercial air service, and regional services. RAM, electric conventional takeoff and landing (eCTOL) aircraft, electric short takeoff and landing (eSTOL) aircraft, and airport-to-airport or airport-to-community service may eventually help improve regional access. These concepts should be evaluated on their own terms, with attention to airport access, reliability, demand, cost, workforce, and community benefit.

Airport modernization may be one of the most practical near-term connections. Existing airports and heliports may serve as early anchors for some emerging aviation activity because they already support aviation operations, emergency response relationships, compatible industrial or

commercial uses in some areas, and existing aviation planning processes. For communities, this creates a useful starting point: evaluate existing aviation assets before assuming that new off-airport infrastructure is the first move.

Economic development and workforce goals also create meaningful connections. Aviation-related activity may support advanced manufacturing, maintenance, logistics, technical training, airport-based development, and business attraction. Communities can make that potential more realistic by focusing on workforce pipelines, utility capacity, available land, airport access, broadband, power, emergency response capability, and predictable local review processes.

Growth management, housing, and community character provide the planning context for evaluating fit. AAM proposals are strongest when they support adopted local goals, such as existing centers, airport districts, employment areas, logistics hubs, public services, or regional access. Communities can use those adopted goals to shape where aviation infrastructure belongs, how it should connect to surrounding land uses, and what conditions should guide review.

Passenger Travel Needs a Clearer Frame

Passenger aviation should be evaluated with more precision than broad labels usually allow. Urban electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) air taxi service, regional passenger mobility, airport-to-airport service, business aviation, eCTOL aircraft, eSTOL aircraft, and future autonomous passenger concepts involve different aircraft, markets, infrastructure needs, public benefits, and community considerations.

Public-sector interest is strongest around practical use cases such as emergency medical services, logistics and cargo, wildfire and emergency response, and airport connections. Passenger travel still deserves space in the discussion, especially where it supports regional access, airport modernization, tourism, business travel, medical access, or connections between communities and regional centers.

Urban air taxi concepts are one part of the passenger mobility discussion. They may be relevant in specific settings, particularly where there is strong inelastic demand, compatible infrastructure, surface access, and a clear relationship to local goals. Regional passenger mobility raises a different set of planning questions. It may build more naturally on existing airports, longer travel distances, rural access needs, tourism markets, business travel, and the role of aviation in connecting communities across Utah's geography.

The planning question is what kind of passenger service is being discussed, what need it addresses, what infrastructure it requires, who benefits, and whether it fits adopted community and regional priorities. These questions gives public agencies a practical way to evaluate passenger aviation without either centering it too early or dismissing it too broadly.

This is the purpose of needs-first planning. It gives communities a way to sort aviation concepts by fit, value, readiness, and role rather than reacting to AAM as one broad category. Once the need is clear, the next step is to determine whether aviation is a useful part of the response and what level of action is appropriate.

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