

3. UTAH PLANNING AND POLICY CONTEXT

The needs-first framework in Section 2 provides a way to evaluate aviation opportunities. Utah's planning and policy context explains why those opportunities are receiving attention now and why local governments are increasingly being asked to understand them.

Utah is not starting from a blank page. The state already has aviation assets, active airport planning, growing freight and logistics needs, rural access challenges, rapid urban growth, major economic development goals, and a long-term transportation planning horizon that includes the 2034 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. AAM is entering that environment as one possible tool within a broader set of public priorities.

Utah's Policy Direction

Utah Senate Bill 96, Advanced Air Mobility Amendments, directed the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) to conduct public education and community outreach related to AAM. It also directed UDOT to develop a publicly available AAM toolkit for political subdivisions. The toolkit is intended to provide model ordinances, best practices, and available resources to help political subdivisions develop and implement AAM policy.

The law also includes an important local-government protection: UDOT may not require a political subdivision to adopt or implement any portion of the toolkit. That makes the toolkit a guidance product rather than a mandate. Its job is to help communities make informed decisions, not to replace local planning judgment.

Utah's statutory definition of AAM is broad. It includes systems for transporting people or property using piloted or unmanned aircraft, including electric aircraft and electric vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. For local planning, Utah's definition keeps the discussion broader than media-focused passenger air taxi narratives. It leaves room for cargo, unmanned aircraft systems, electric aviation, passenger service, and supporting infrastructure.

State-level efforts such as Project Alta and the work of 47G have added momentum to the conversation. These efforts connect AAM to transportation, logistics, airport modernization, passenger mobility, cargo movement, workforce, infrastructure, and economic development. The 2034 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games provide a planning horizon, but the stronger public-sector question is what durable value these efforts can create for Utah communities before, during, and after the Games.

What the Plan Review and Survey Confirmed

The plan review and survey point in the same general direction. Utah communities are already working on priorities that may intersect with aviation, and local stakeholders want clearer guidance before they are asked to evaluate proposals or update policy.

The plan review showed that Utah communities are focused on resilience, access, freight, workforce development, economic diversification, emergency response, growth management, airport compatibility, housing, infrastructure readiness, and community character. These are the priorities AAM should be evaluated against.

The survey added the implementation perspective. Respondents generally expected AAM to affect Utah communities, but many reported limited familiarity and low organizational preparedness. They identified practical use cases, including emergency medical services, logistics and cargo, wildfire and emergency response, and airport connections. They also identified the areas where guidance is most needed: roles and responsibilities, plain-language concepts, Utah-specific policy direction, land use, infrastructure, siting, and coordination.

Together, the plan review and survey clarify the purpose of this toolkit. Communities need a practical planning resource that helps them understand what AAM is, where it may fit, who has responsibility, and how to evaluate proposals against local goals.

The Readiness Gap

Utah has state-level momentum, active industry interest, and a broad statutory framework for AAM. Local governments, however, are still building the knowledge, policy language, coordination pathways, and decision tools needed to engage with these technologies.

That gap is practical. It shows up when a city does not know whether an AAM proposal belongs in a zoning ordinance, airport plan, transportation plan, economic development strategy, emergency operations plan, or capital improvement process. It shows up when staff are unsure which questions belong to the Federal Aviation Administration, which questions belong to UDOT, which questions belong to an airport sponsor, and which questions belong to local planning, fire, building, public works, or elected officials.

The gap also shows up in timing. Communities may encounter operator interest, developer proposals, state initiatives, airport modernization projects, or public questions before they have adopted local definitions, review criteria, interagency contacts, or internal staff guidance. The toolkit is designed to help communities prepare before those moments become urgent.

Why This Toolkit Exists

This toolkit exists to connect Utah's state-level AAM direction with local planning practice.

It gives communities a way to evaluate aviation through existing priorities rather than treating it as a standalone technology topic. It helps public agencies understand their roles, recognize where coordination is needed, and identify the level of action that fits their readiness and local context.

For some communities, the right near-term action may be awareness and monitoring. For others, it may be coordination with an airport sponsor, updating airport-compatible land-use policies, preparing internal intake questions for aviation-related proposals, or identifying where UAS logistics, emergency response, airport modernization, or regional mobility could support adopted goals.

Utah is preparing for AAM and communities will experience that preparation through land use, infrastructure, emergency response, economic development, public trust, and local governance. This toolkit is intended to help those decisions become clearer, better coordinated, and more useful to the communities they serve.