

7. GOVERNANCE, ROLES, AUTHORITY, AND COORDINATION

The previous governance modules explained how authority is distributed across the aviation system. They identified who regulates aircraft, operations, airspace, infrastructure, and community-facing issues, and where local, state, federal, airport, and private-sector responsibilities begin and end.

This section starts from how communities work within those boundaries when no single organization controls the entire system.

Most aviation-related initiatives require participation from organizations that operate under different authorities, funding structures, planning processes, and implementation timelines. A proposed vertiport, airport modernization effort, logistics operation, emergency-response capability, or Regional Air Mobility service may involve local governments, airport sponsors, utility providers, emergency responders, transportation agencies, private operators, state agencies, and community stakeholders. Each may control part of the process, but none typically controls all of it.

This challenge is not unique to aviation. Transportation projects, utility upgrades, economic development initiatives, emergency management systems, and major infrastructure investments often require multiple organizations to coordinate decisions, funding, infrastructure, and public expectations. Aviation simply makes those relationships more visible because authority is distributed across federal, state, regional, local, public, and private entities.

The practical governance question is how the right organizations coordinate decisions, share information, assign responsibility, and turn planning into action.

This section therefore focuses on the structures, practices, and partnerships that help communities move from interest to coordination, from coordination to commitments, and from commitments to accountable action.

7.1 Fragmented Authority Requires Structured Coordination

One of the most common implementation challenges in aviation is not a lack of authority. It is a lack of alignment.

A project may have community support, technical merit, available funding, and a willing operator. It may still struggle if key participants are working from different assumptions, different timelines, or different priorities.

Transportation and infrastructure planning often operate in fragmented governance environments. Different organizations control different parts of the system, including funding, land use, infrastructure, operations, safety, utilities, and public engagement. The challenge is

not to collapse those responsibilities into one agency. The challenge is to create coordination structures that allow separate organizations to make related decisions with enough shared information, timing, and accountability to support implementation (Deakin 2020; Marsden and Reardon 2018).

Utah already uses this approach in several areas of transportation planning. The Utah Unified Transportation Plan brings together UDOT, UTA, MPOs, and regional partners around shared planning horizons, performance measures, and financial assumptions. Individual organizations retain their responsibilities, but coordination creates a common direction for implementation.

Research from transportation planning, economic development, airport planning, and AAM integration points to a similar lesson. Successful implementation usually depends less on creating a new authority structure and more on establishing a shared operating framework: who convenes, who decides, who advises, who funds, who implements, and how unresolved issues are elevated.

This is one reason many successful AAM and UAS initiatives rely on standing coordination structures rather than one-time planning efforts. Examples include regional task forces, implementation workstreams, interagency working groups, airport coordination forums, utility coordination groups, and pilot implementation teams. These structures create a place where issues can be identified, routed to the appropriate decision-makers, and tracked through implementation, with the goal being fewer surprises.

Structured coordination gives participants a common place to share information, route issues, clarify responsibilities, and keep related decisions moving in the same direction.

7.2 Create a Lead and a Convening Structure

Complex initiatives rarely move forward through coordination alone. Successful implementation typically requires someone to organize conversations, track decisions, maintain momentum, and connect organizations that may not regularly work together.

Transportation governance literature often describes this role as a convening or boundary-spanning function. The lead organization does not need to own every decision. It needs enough legitimacy, staff capacity, and continuity to organize participants, document decisions, track unresolved issues, and keep technical work connected to policy choices (Deakin 2020; Marsden and Reardon 2018).

The lead organization may vary depending on the initiative. For some efforts, the airport sponsor may be the natural convener. For others, the role may be filled by a local government, MPO, Association of Governments, state agency, economic development organization, university, or project sponsor. What matters most is that participants understand who is responsible for convening discussions, tracking progress, documenting decisions, and coordinating next steps.

Utah already has coordination structures that can support this kind of work, including MPOs, Associations of Governments, workforce partnerships, utility coordination forums, economic development organizations, and regional coordinating councils. The practical task is to use those structures deliberately, rather than creating a separate aviation process that sits outside them.

Regional organizations can be especially valuable because their boundaries often reflect the way transportation, economic development, and community issues already function in practice. MPOs, Associations of Governments, and Economic Development Districts may not control local zoning, utility infrastructure, airport property, or project funding, but their regional plans, transportation plans, and Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies often describe the same communities, corridors, employment centers, and infrastructure constraints. That makes them useful conveners for aviation-related discussions that cross jurisdictional boundaries or involve multiple communities.

The capacity to serve this role may vary across the state. Larger MPOs and regional organizations often possess substantial planning and technical resources, while smaller jurisdictions and rural regions may rely more heavily on state agencies, partner organizations, or shared regional capacity.

Several AAM and UAS initiatives use this kind of structure. The North Central Texas Council of Governments created a recurring UAS Safety and Integration Task Force to bring public agencies, local governments, industry, and public safety stakeholders into a shared forum. Kansas organized its AAM strategy around implementation pathways and workstreams rather than a single agency-led mandate. NASA community integration work similarly emphasizes structured workshops and cross-sector participation around specific implementation questions (NCTCOG 2024; Kansas DOT 2024; NASA 2021).

This structure helps transform broad coordination into actionable work by separating strategic direction, technical problem solving, and project delivery.

The specific structure may vary from one community or region to another, but the underlying principle remains consistent. Communities benefit when coordination responsibilities are visible, leadership is clearly identified, and participants understand how decisions move from discussion to action.

7.3 Use Workstreams to Organize the Work

Aviation-related initiatives often involve too many issues for one committee or department to manage well. Land use, utilities, public safety, airport compatibility, funding, workforce, data, public engagement, and operations require different expertise, different participants, and different timelines.

Workstreams provide a practical way to organize this complexity. Rather than asking one large group to manage every topic, communities or regions can separate the work into focused areas with clear leads, participants, deliverables, and timelines.

The Kansas AAM Strategy provides one example. Its roadmap organized implementation around defined pathways rather than leaving AAM coordination at the level of broad policy aspiration. The transferable lesson is not that Utah should copy Kansas. It is that complex aviation initiatives become more manageable when broad goals are translated into accountable work areas (Kansas DOT 2024).

For Utah communities, useful workstreams may include local planning and community integration, infrastructure and utility readiness, public safety and government UAS coordination, operations and data, workforce and economic development, and funding or pilot delivery. The exact categories should reflect the use case being evaluated. A public safety drone program will require a different structure than an airport charging project, regional cargo route, tourism service, or future vertiport proposal.

Workstreams are most useful when they produce something concrete. Each one should have a defined purpose, a lead, a set of participants, and an expected output. One group might prepare a utility-readiness screen. Another might identify emergency-response needs. Another might draft public engagement principles or evaluate how the proposed activity fits adopted plans. The point is to move from discussion to usable work products that inform decisions.

This approach also helps clarify when broader coordination is needed. A technical workstream may identify an issue that requires policy direction, local approval, airport sponsor action, utility investment, or public engagement. When those pathways are clear, technical findings can move into decisions instead of stalling inside discussion groups.

For aviation-related initiatives, workstreams are most useful when they connect back to a larger coordination structure. A statewide steering group, regional working group, or lead agency can help ensure that technical work remains aligned with community goals, public responsibilities, and implementation realities.

7.4 Coordinate Before Decisions Harden

Coordination is most valuable before major decisions become difficult to change. Once a site has been selected, funding has been announced, public expectations have been set, or a private partner has begun designing around a preferred concept, it becomes harder to revisit basic questions about compatibility, utilities, emergency access, public concerns, or implementation responsibility.

Aviation-related initiatives should therefore involve key partners early enough to shape the project, not merely react to it. For most communities, that means bringing in local governments, airport sponsors, utilities, emergency responders, regional planning organizations, Tribal

governments, community representatives, and private operators before a proposal is treated as implementation-ready.

Several issues deserve early attention because they can affect feasibility before a proposal reaches formal approval. Utility capacity, broadband, rights-of-way, emergency access, fire response, protected airspace, airport compatibility, and community concerns may all shape whether a site or use case is practical. These issues are easier to address when they inform site selection, project design, and phasing from the beginning.

Early coordination does not require every issue to be resolved before planning begins. It does require the right organizations to be involved while options still exist. The key timing question is whether affected partners are being asked to shape the proposal or merely respond to it.

7.5 Turn Coordination Into Commitments

Coordination becomes useful when it produces clear commitments. A meeting may identify issues, build relationships, or improve shared understanding, but implementation usually requires documented responsibilities, timelines, decision points, and follow-up actions.

Different tools can serve this purpose depending on the project. A local government may use an implementation strategy to identify leads, partners, phasing, and funding. Multiple jurisdictions may use an interlocal agreement to share responsibilities or costs. A pilot project may require a memorandum of understanding, concept of operations, data-sharing agreement, safety plan, utility plan, operator commitments, or after-action report.

The specific tool matters less than the discipline behind it. Participants should understand what has been agreed to, who is responsible for the next step, what information is still needed, and when the issue will return for review or decision.

This is especially important for public-private collaboration. Private operators, developers, industry associations, universities, and nonprofits may all contribute expertise, funding, facilities, outreach, or technical capacity. Those roles can be valuable, but they should be clear. Public agencies should retain responsibility for public-purpose decisions, community engagement expectations, procurement requirements, and accountability for public resources.

For aviation-related initiatives, coordination should leave behind something usable: a decision record, implementation task, agreement, work product, pilot protocol, funding strategy, or public-facing explanation of what happens next. This is especially important for pilot projects. A pilot should not end only with a demonstration or ribbon cutting. It should produce lessons learned, documented constraints, community feedback, operational findings, and a decision about whether the concept should be continued, modified, scaled, or stopped.

7.6 Use Intermediaries Carefully

Intermediary organizations can help communities coordinate across sectors that do not naturally work together. Nonprofits, trade associations, chambers, universities, industry alliances, and civic organizations may help convene participants, translate technical issues, support public education, organize workforce partnerships, or connect public agencies with private-sector expertise.

Project ALTA provides a useful Utah example of intermediary-led ecosystem convening. It can help organize industry, public agencies, universities, infrastructure partners, and economic development interests around a shared advanced aviation agenda. Its value is strongest when it accelerates learning, surfaces implementation issues, and helps connect public and private participants without replacing public decision-making.

At the same time, ecosystem convening is not the same as public governance. Public agencies should retain responsibility for public-purpose framing, policy decisions, procurement rules, community engagement expectations, safety coordination, and accountability for public resources.

Different organizations bring different strengths. Nonprofits may be well suited for education, research, workforce development, community outreach, or public-benefit programming. Trade associations and chambers may be better suited for industry coordination, employer demand signals, supply-chain development, advocacy, and market intelligence. Both can inform public decision-making, but neither should be treated as a substitute for public authority, procurement rules, or elected accountability.

The practical task is to define the intermediary role clearly. Is the organization convening, educating, advocating, facilitating, managing a grant, supporting workforce development, or representing industry interests? Clarity on that role helps preserve trust and prevents collaboration from becoming confused with endorsement, procurement, or delegation of public authority.

Taken together, these practices help communities act in a fragmented governance environment without pretending that one organization controls the whole system. The goal is practical coordination: clear leads, focused workstreams, early involvement of key partners, documented commitments, and careful use of intermediaries. When those pieces are in place, communities are better positioned to move from planning to implementation while preserving public accountability.

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