

DOORWAY BRIEF: WE WANT TO DEVELOP AN AIRPORT

Why You Might Be Here

Your community may be interested in developing a new airport, expanding an existing airport, reactivating a former airport, or evaluating whether airport development is appropriate for future transportation, economic development, emergency response, or aviation-related goals.

Airport development is often a long-term undertaking involving federal, state, local, and private stakeholders. While the process can be complex, it exists to help communities identify potential airspace conflicts, safety concerns, compatibility issues, environmental considerations, and operational needs before significant resources are invested.

This doorway is intended to help communities understand the basic process, key decisions, and relevant toolkit resources.

Start with the FAA

One of the first steps in developing a new airport is engaging with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

Federal regulations require advance notice before constructing, activating, altering, or changing the status of an airport. This process typically begins through FAA Form 7480-1 and the procedures established under 14 CFR Part 157. The FAA uses this information to conduct an aeronautical study and evaluate how a proposed airport may affect existing airspace, aviation operations, and nearby facilities.

Importantly, FAA review does not replace local approvals, state requirements, zoning decisions, environmental review, or community planning processes. FAA determinations are advisory and are intended to support safe and efficient use of the National Airspace System.

Public or Private?

One of the earliest decisions involves determining whether the airport is intended to be public-use or private-use.

Public-use airports are available for use by the general public and may qualify for certain federal and state funding programs. Public-use facilities may also assume additional responsibilities related to access, planning, maintenance, grant obligations, and long-term operation.

Private-use airports generally provide greater flexibility in some areas but may have different funding opportunities/challenges and operational considerations.

This distinction influences future planning decisions and should be considered early in the process.

Airport Development Involves More Than Runways

Communities sometimes envision airport development primarily as a runway project. In practice, airports are transportation facilities that require a supporting system of infrastructure and services.

Examples may include:

- Airfield infrastructure
- Vehicle access
- Utilities
- Emergency response
- Security
- Fueling or charging infrastructure
- Communications systems
- Weather information
- Maintenance facilities
- Hangars
- Ground transportation connections

The scale of these needs depends on the airport's intended role.

Defining the Airport's Purpose

Before discussing infrastructure, communities should understand why the airport is being proposed.

Possible objectives may include:

- Community access
- Emergency medical transportation
- Economic development
- Business aviation
- Tourism
- Agricultural aviation
- Cargo and logistics
- Workforce development
- Public safety
- Wildfire response

The airport's purpose influences nearly every subsequent planning decision.

Understanding Long-Term Commitments

Airports are long-lived assets. Planning decisions made early can influence operations, compatibility, and development patterns for decades.

Communities should consider:

- Long-term ownership
- Maintenance responsibilities
- Capital improvement needs
- Utility requirements
- Emergency response capability
- Land-use compatibility
- Future expansion potential
- Community goals

Successful airport projects begin with a clear understanding of how the facility supports broader transportation, economic development, public safety, and community objectives.

Building a Strong Foundation

Communities do not need to wait until demand warrants construction to improve readiness.

There are several areas that a community may work on in anticipation, including:

- Reviewing airport-related ordinances
- Updating aviation definitions and terminology
- Evaluating airport overlay districts
- Reviewing conditional use permits and development standards
- Updating emergency response plans
- Improving coordination among stakeholders
- Identifying compatible and incompatible land uses
- Understanding existing airspace and aviation activity

These activities can provide value regardless of whether airport development ultimately proceeds.

Recommended Next Steps

If your community is considering airport development, consider reviewing:

Infrastructure, Land Use, and Place

To better understand airport siting, airport design, supporting infrastructure, access, compatibility planning, and long-term facility considerations.

Governance, Roles, Authority, and Coordination

To understand the responsibilities of local governments, airport sponsors, operators, state agencies, and federal agencies.

Environmental and Noise Mitigation Strategies

To understand environmental review, aircraft noise, land use compatibility, and community expectations.

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Guide

To evaluate emergency response planning, facility access, training, mutual aid, and preparedness considerations.

Economic Development and Readiness

To explore how airport development may support transportation, logistics, business access, workforce development, tourism, emergency response, or other local objectives.

Resource Directory

To locate FAA airport notification resources, airport planning guidance, environmental review resources, and other supporting materials.

Questions to Consider

- Why is the airport being proposed?
- Will the facility be public-use or private-use?
- Has the FAA been contacted?
- What transportation, economic development, emergency response, or public safety needs would the airport support?
- Are there existing airports nearby that already meet those needs?
- How would emergency response be provided?
- What utility and infrastructure requirements would be needed?
- How would surrounding land uses be affected?
- What long-term responsibilities would ownership create?
- Which sections of this toolkit are most relevant to the community's goals?

Airport development is ultimately a community planning decision. Understanding the purpose of the airport, the needs it is intended to address, and the responsibilities that accompany ownership can help communities make informed decisions before significant investments are made.