WHO CONTROLS WHAT?

Roles and Responsibilities for AAM and UAS

Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) introduce new questions for local governments, airports, planners, emergency responders, utilities, transportation agencies, and communities across Utah. As aviation technologies evolve, communities are increasingly being asked to evaluate new aircraft concepts, infrastructure proposals, operational models, and public expectations that may not fit neatly within traditional planning or transportation frameworks.

Before discussing governance, it is helpful to remember that aviation functions as a connected system. Aircraft capabilities influence operations. Operations influence airspace requirements. Airspace requirements influence infrastructure needs. Communities then experience the impacts and benefits created by those operations and infrastructure. Governance does not sit outside this system. It influences and interacts with each layer.

One of the biggest challenges in these discussions is that different parts of the aviation system are governed by different organizations and regulatory structures. Aircraft certification, airspace management, operational rules, infrastructure approvals, emergency response, land use, and community compatibility do not all fall under the same authority.

This often creates confusion.

Some stakeholders assume the FAA controls every aspect of aviation activity, including local land use and infrastructure decisions. Others assume local governments can regulate AAM operations the same way they regulate other transportation or development projects. Neither assumption accurately reflects how aviation governance works in practice.

Aircraft certification, pilot certification, operational rules, and navigable airspace are primarily federal responsibilities. At the same time, local governments continue to play important roles related to:

- zoning,
- land-use compatibility,
- infrastructure review,
- building and fire code,
- emergency response coordination,
- utility coordination,
- public engagement,
- and broader community planning.

The complexity increases further because AAM is not one single type of operation. A public safety drone program, a medical logistics route, a cargo delivery operation, an airport electrification project, a private-use heliport, and a future passenger eVTOL network may all involve different aircraft, infrastructure, operating rules, approval pathways, and public concerns.

This section is intended to help Utah communities understand:

- who controls what,
- where coordination is needed,
- what local governments can realistically influence,
- where legal or operational limits exist,
- and how different parts of the aviation system connect together.

This section is not intended to provide legal advice or predict how every future AAM concept will be regulated. Some areas of AAM governance continue to evolve, particularly around vertiports, low-altitude operations, private-use infrastructure, unmanned logistics systems, and future passenger mobility concepts. However, many of the underlying aviation governance structures already exist today through traditional aviation systems, airport planning, operational rules, emergency management frameworks, and land-use compatibility planning.

The following governance modules are organized around five major areas that mirror the aviation system framework:

- Aircraft Governance,
- Operations Governance,
- Airspace Governance,
- Infrastructure Governance,
- and Community Governance.

Together, these modules explain how responsibilities are distributed across:

- federal agencies,
- state agencies,
- local governments,
- airport sponsors,
- operators,
- utilities,
- emergency responders,
- and surrounding communities.

Each module uses a modified RACI framework to explain:

- Responsible | Primary Regulatory or Operational Lead,
- Accountable | Primary Entity Responsible for Compliance or Implementation,

- Consulted | Organizations or Stakeholders Typically Engaged During Planning, Review, or Operations,
- and Informed | Stakeholders Commonly Affected, Notified, or Engaged.

Aviation projects often involve multiple overlapping approval environments at the same time. Depending on the proposal, reviews may involve:

- FAA operational and airspace considerations,
- local land-use approval,
- building and fire code review,
- emergency response planning,
- utility coordination,
- airport compatibility review,
- property ownership,
- and environmental or community considerations.

This layered structure is one reason aviation infrastructure and operational proposals can become complicated quickly, particularly when communities are unfamiliar with aviation governance processes.

The modules that follow are intended to provide a practical planning and policy foundation for Utah communities as they evaluate current and future aviation activity.