

Viewpoint: The Challenge Of Building AAM Infrastructure

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Credit: Monterey Bay Economic Partnership

As advanced air mobility (AAM) aircraft move closer to deployment, regional airports are discovering that infrastructure readiness depends on coordinated systems, operational data, and community alignment that extend far beyond the aircraft themselves.

The FAA's decision to delay its Unified Vertical Lift Infrastructure Advisory Circular until 2027 has attracted attention across the AAM community, largely because it reflects a challenge many of us are confronting in real time. Aircraft development continues to advance, yet the operational environment required to support those aircraft is still taking shape.

From where I sit, leading the Monterey Bay Economic Partnership's California Advanced Air Mobility Corridors Initiative (CAAMCI), the delay is less a setback than a recognition that the industry still has work to do before infrastructure guidance can be informed by sufficient real-world experience. The CAAMCI is a first-of-its-kind effort to establish the state's first FAA-compliant regional advanced air mobility corridor connecting public-use airports across California's Central Coast region.

Much of the public conversation around AAM has centered on aircraft. That focus is understandable. New aircraft capture attention, attract investment, and provide visible proof of technological progress. What receives less attention is the collection of systems that must function together once those aircraft begin operating within communities and transportation networks.

When I walk through the airports participating in our initiative, the infrastructure gap is rarely defined by the condition of a runway or the absence of a new facility. Instead, it appears in the questions that airports, utilities, regulators, operators, and local stakeholders are working to answer together as they prepare for a new category of aviation activity.

More Than Equipment

Infrastructure readiness means more than equipment; it involves energy capacity, charging systems, communications networks, emergency response planning, operational procedures, workforce preparation, and data-sharing capabilities. It also involves understanding how those elements interact under real operating conditions.

Airports that have served their communities successfully for decades were not designed around the energy demands, operational requirements, or coordination needs associated with AAM. Preparing for that future requires creating an operating environment that allows multiple systems, organizations, and users to function together safely and reliably. That is exactly the role that the CAAMCI was designed to play: helping multiple airports, public agencies, utilities, industry partners, and communities build a coordinated operating environment rather than a collection of isolated infrastructure projects.

One lesson that has emerged quickly from the CAAMCI’s work connecting airports across the Central Coast is that infrastructure planning becomes far more complicated when viewed beyond the boundaries of a single airport. Every public-use airport has its own history, physical characteristics, operational profile, and development priorities. Some airports are exploring use cases connected to wildfire response and emergency services. Others are evaluating passenger transportation opportunities.

Existing infrastructure varies as well. In some locations, charging systems have been designed around a specific aircraft developer. Elsewhere, software platforms and operational tools differ significantly from one airport to the next. Those differences matter because AAM will ultimately depend on networks rather than isolated facilities.

That reality is one reason I believe connected public-use airports provide a particularly valuable environment for generating the operational data the industry needs. Test facilities and research campuses play an essential role in advancing technology, but they cannot fully replicate the complexity of a regional transportation ecosystem.

The FAA needs information that extends beyond aircraft performance. It needs to understand how charging demand affects local utilities, how emergency response protocols function across different jurisdictions, how communications systems support operations, how staffing requirements evolve, and how communities experience these activities as they move from demonstration projects into routine use.

Networks Generate Data

A network of public-use airports allows those questions to be explored under varying geographic, operational, and community conditions. It creates opportunities to understand how different use cases perform across multiple locations while revealing where standards, processes, and infrastructure investments may need to evolve. The resulting data is inherently richer because it reflects the realities of operating within environments that people already use and depend upon.

Interoperability has emerged as another area where regional thinking matters. Across the industry, airports and operators are trying to determine how charging infrastructure should be developed while aircraft technologies continue to mature. Some systems have been designed around individual manufacturers, while broader conversations are moving toward common standards that can support a wider range of aircraft.

From an airport planning perspective, long-term infrastructure decisions become more durable when they accommodate flexibility and future growth. Public-use airports must be positioned to serve an evolving marketplace rather than a single participant within it.

What has surprised me most over the course of this work is how quickly conversations about aircraft readiness expand into conversations about community readiness. Technology remains central to the future of AAM, yet successful implementation depends on a broader group of participants than many people initially assume.

Cities, utilities, airport operators, workforce organizations, regulators, emergency response agencies, and community stakeholders all influence whether new capabilities can move from demonstration into regular use. Alignment across those groups takes time, coordination, and a shared understanding of how infrastructure investments support public benefit.

For policymakers and economic development leaders, that broader perspective may be the most useful takeaway. AAM infrastructure cannot be approached as a collection of individual airport projects because the system itself will operate across jurisdictions, communities, and transportation networks.

The aircraft are advancing rapidly, and continued progress on that front is encouraging. The challenge now is ensuring that the ground-level systems surrounding those aircraft develop with the same sense of purpose, allowing AAM to function as part of an integrated regional transportation environment rather than a series of disconnected demonstrations.

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