



MEETING SYNOPSIS

November 19, 2021 | Tuscaloosa National Airport

The following is a summary of the fifth meeting of the Connectivity subcommittee. The attendance sheet follows this summary. The agenda and other meeting materials can be found on the website under About > Meetings.

Welcome

Mayor Maddox (City of Tuscaloosa) welcomed the subcommittee. He began by announcing that the City is one of two in Alabama to be awarded a RAISE grant by the U.S. Department of Transportation for 2021. The total funding awarded to Alabama was about 18 million dollars, and 17.1 million will come to Tuscaloosa for the University Boulevard corridor improvements project. Mayor Maddox thanked the City Council and staff for their efforts on the grant. The grant funds will be matched with over 10 million dollars in local city funds, primarily provided by Elevate Tuscaloosa. The grant funding will enable improvements to the western (Downtown-Campus) and eastern (Alberta) ends of the corridor. These will include stormwater upgrades, new pavement, pedestrian access, biking facilities, fiber, and utilities, among others. This award brings the total grants for Elevate projects to over 43 million dollars.

Another announcement of relevance to this subcommittee is the recent passage of the federal infrastructure bill. This legislation provides funding in a variety of areas, including airports, roads, bridges, stormwater facilities, water and sewer, broadband, and electric vehicle technology. Tuscaloosa should be in a good position to take advantage of these grants, especially since Elevate Tuscaloosa provides us with competitive local matching funds. The Advisory Council will receive an email with more information about this today.

The State of Alabama received about two billion dollars from the American Rescue Plan. Of this, about 200 million dollars are set aside for local governments to seek funding. Overall, many funding opportunities are currently available and the City will aggressively seek them. We have learned a significant amount about obtaining and complying with federal funding requirements, in part due to the influx of disaster recovery funding we received following the April 2011 tornadoes. This knowledge will benefit us greatly moving forward.

Finally, Mayor Maddox thanked Dave Pass (subcommittee member and Airport Advisory Council member) for the significant amount of time he volunteers toward airport activities and advocacy. Brendan Moore (City of Tuscaloosa) noted that this subcommittee will want to focus project priorities on those most likely to result in grant funding in order to leverage the many opportunities available. He also noted that the Advisory Council will receive an email after Thanksgiving to obtain input about meetings, structure, and format in 2022. With that, he turned the meeting over to Jeff Powell (Airport Manager) and Dave Pass.



Tuscaloosa National Airport Presentation

Mr. Pass began by recognizing the effort of his fellow Airport Advisory Council members, including Bill Buchanan, who was in attendance. This body makes recommendations to the City Council for consideration and adoption. Their goal is to work through points of disagreement in order to reach a consensus on all items recommended. They have made some recent suggestions to update and improve airport revenues. Mr. Pass turned it over to Mr. Powell, noting that Mr. Powell is also president of the Aviation Council of Alabama, which lobbies on behalf of all state airports.

Mr. Powell provided background information about his Alabama roots, as well as his professional and military experience outside the state. He turned to an overview of the airport. Staff are constantly in planning mode, looking ahead by one, five, and fifteen years to adjust operations and strategic position to accommodate community needs.

Current statistics about airport operations and assets were provided. Air traffic includes cargo, charters, military, and many other types. Volume peaks on football gamedays, for other sporting events, and for significant university events. The primary runway was reconstructed earlier this summer, and cargo planes were landing on it the same week the work was completed. The air traffic control facility is federally funded, including its operations, with the exception of overtime work that Tuscaloosa requests (we pay for that).

The airport is annually inspected and audited by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to ensure their safety standards are met. The resulting accreditation is the same as that achieved by the likes of the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. This places Tuscaloosa in a category with only five airports in Alabama, and enables large cargo aircraft to use our airport. The FAA classifies all airports based on the operations of each. Tuscaloosa National Airport is classified as a Nonprimary, General Aviation National airport, one of only 89 in the country. These categories are used to award annual FAA funding to airports. Local business enterprises use our airport regularly for maintaining and growing their reach around the country and the world. If we are able to obtain commercial air service, we will move into one of the FAA's Primary classifications, according to our size.

In Alabama, the aerospace industry is a top priority for Governor Ivey's administration. The economic impact of Tuscaloosa's airport places it ninth (out of 78) in the state for total economic activity. Airports ranked higher either offer commercial air service, or have a very heavy presence of aerospace industry. The chart in Mr. Powell's presentation indicates that investing in our airport could potentially return a large economic impact.

Currently, the City is updating the airport master plan. It should go before the City Council for approval and adoption in the first quarter of 2022. This document is updated about once every ten years and is heavily regulated by the FAA. The plan specifies capital improvement priorities, among many other decision-making tools. The document also includes plans for space at the airport and how to best use and maximize it.



Mr. Powell commented that cargo aircraft operations are not predictable and annual numbers fluctuate. Michele Coley (subcommittee member) asked what sources of revenue are targeted to provide more stable, predictable income. Mr. Powell responded that the best way to do this is to recruit industry and companies to add physical operations at the airport, whether through office or hangar space. Mr. Pass noted that one great way to incentivize companies to do this is to add infrastructure (utilities, etc.) to undeveloped airport land in order to remove barriers to entry. The master plan identifies the best areas on the property where this could be accomplished. Extending the length of the runway is also an important recruitment tool.

Generally, community input and advocacy are extremely important to the airport's success. This led to the recent effort of obtaining full grant funding to reconstruct the primary runway. Linda Parsons (subcommittee member) asked if the Elevate funding would be used to support the existing master plan, or if it would instead provide for completely new, as-yet unidentified opportunities for projects at the airport. The response was that it would go toward the priorities identified in the master plan first. Mr. Powell also commented that project prioritization is critical because discretionary grant funding opportunities are very competitive and typically will not be awarded to our airport more frequently than once every few years. Project timing can also be sensitive, as each must be planned in coordination with ongoing operations.

Mr. Powell highlighted the key areas for the airport in the recently passed federal infrastructure bill.

Mayor Maddox made the point that this bill is a tremendous opportunity for Tuscaloosa. Our city owns its own water and sewer utility and its own airport, two assets which make us unique as a municipality. However, with this opportunity comes the challenge of having the staff time and staff bandwidth to seek these funds and do it well enough to be competitive against the many other entities doing the same.

Mr. Powell noted that the airport terminal program is unique in this funding program's history and he expects competition for these dollars to be very tight. Projects will be more likely to get funding if they are ready for immediate implementation or construction and are backed by sufficient local funds to match the grant. The question was debated: should the city's local funding and staff time and energy be directed more heavily toward seeking federal grants or state funds (e.g. through lobbying efforts)? Mr. Pass noted that renovating our terminal (or building a new one) is going to be a challenging prospect from a timing perspective. A modern terminal is a critical asset for recruiting air service; however, until we have commercial service, we will struggle to demonstrate a compelling case showing the need for a new terminal. The most likely scenario is that we may need to take an intermediary step in that direction to aid in our recruiting efforts and to have the facility available and ready to use on day one in the event of success. The terminal could then be further improved as operations grow and



evolve. Successfully growing the number of enplanements at the airport (e.g., through commercial air service) will also unlock new federal entitlement funding by moving the airport into a different funding tier as a result of more enplanements.

The air traffic control tower needs to be replaced. Currently, its maintenance is consolidated under the air traffic control facilities in Birmingham. The new legislation provides funding that is the first of its kind devoted to FAA facilities and equipment. Mr. Powell is pursuing opportunities to place Tuscaloosa on a list to obtain a portion of the funding. Support from our federal delegation would greatly assist this effort.

Mr. Pass discussed the role of the Airport Advisory Council. Its members represent a variety of institutional and economic stakeholders in Tuscaloosa. One responsibility they have is to recommend airport policies to the legislative body. Ideally, these policies will sustain and grow operations. The second is to develop commercial air service. The third is to promote economic development and growth in our region via the airport.

Recruiting commercial air service was discussed. Tuscaloosa's airport hosted commercial service from the 1950s through the 1990s, when the contract was terminated by local officials. Other communities similarly situated to us that offer air service at their airports typically have maintained the service over the long-term, experiencing no period of time when they abandoned it. They usually begin with "essential air service" before growing into full commercial service. As the pandemic has progressed, the tourist industry has been quicker to rebound from the downturn; business travel has been slower to recover.

Tuscaloosa airport staff and professional consultants developed a significant-enough business case for having commercial service that we were awarded a federal grant that can be used to recruit new air service. Before the pandemic, 360,000 airline tickets were sold to Tuscaloosa County residents, per available point of sale data. A rule of thumb suggests that at least 50,000 tickets are needed to sustain air service annually. The air market survey conducted just before the pandemic suggested that our community is extremely supportive of local air service in Tuscaloosa, in spite of our proximity to two other airports within an hour's drive.

From the airlines' perspectives, the decision about starting new service in a community is often complex. Each company is ultimately making a business decision, and they tend to make choices that are less risky and most cost effective. This often means adding new planes or new routes to airports they already service. The grant that we have access to is a key factor in helping us recruit. The funding can help mitigate risks and offset costs for an airline, making the recruiting case more attractive. Mr. Pass made the point that adding commercial air service at our airport is a very strong asset that has the potential to positively impact the success of several other Elevate projects.



Next Steps

The airport advisory committee would appreciate any feedback from the Elevate Advisory Council about the best way to utilize Elevate funding to leverage and maximize the multiple grant opportunities available.

Ms. Coley suggested that in 2022, the Advisory Council might benefit from a meeting to review the status of completed or ongoing Elevate Tuscaloosa projects, review the projects that have been awarded grant funds, review the project plan going forward, and identify the highest priorities.

**Subcommittee Meeting Attendance
November 19, 2021**

Name	In Attendance
Alexander, Tamika	YES
Blakeney, William	NO
Coley, Michele	YES
Lawrence, Russell	NO
Moore, Wilson	NO
Mumper, Russell	NO
Newman, Brad	NO
Parsons, Linda	YES
Pass, David	YES
Prewitt, Nicole	YES
Brooks, Karen (EAC co-chair)	NO
England, Chris (EAC co-chair)	YES
Wilson, Matthew (City Council District 1)	NO
Howard, Raevan (City Council District 2)	NO
Crow, Norman (City Council District 3)	NO
Busby, Lee (City Council District 4)	NO
Tyner, Kip (City Council District 5)	NO
Faile, John (City Council District 6)	NO
Lanier, Cassius (City Council District 7)	NO