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Port San Antonio jockeying to be ‘flying car’ hub

Site preparation for a vertiport at the Port is set to begin this month. Leaders say it’ll be the first operational vertiport in the world.

Brandon Lingle – May 6, 2024

Panelists speak Friday about the future of mobility during a panel discussion at Boeing Center at Tech Port on Port San Antonio’s campus on the Southwest Side. Photo: Jessica Phelps

Jim Perschbach’s vision to make Port San Antonio a hub for futuristic aircraft is another step closer to reality.

Perschbach, the Port’s president and CEO, has long said that electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft flying around the city could become common in a few years. The idea is that the small craft, known as

Dan Dalton, vice president of global partnerships at Wisk, speaks Friday about the future of mobility during a panel discussion at Boeing Center at Tech Port on Port San Antonio's campus on the Southwest Side. Photo: Jessica Phelps

eVTOLs and sometimes described as flying cars or robotaxis, will transport several people or cargo without traffic delays or parking hassles.

Now, with a deal in the works to build a vertiport at Port San Antonio and state agencies preparing for this new mode of transportation, the port is seeking a corporate partner to help grow eVTOL capabilities in the region.

Perschbach, who participated in a panel discussion Friday at the Port about the future of mobility, thinks the small aircraft, which resemble a cross between a miniature helicopter and a car, could someday relieve congested traffic — just the start of how such next-generation aircraft could change life.

"We've got a really immediate need for these aircraft as we keep adding people to our campus," said Perschbach, who is on the Texas Transportation Commission's Advanced Air Mobility Advisory Committee and was on the state's Urban Air Mobility Advisory Committee. "We're running into traditional parking and transportation problems, and if we can keep 1,000 people from having to drive and park on the campus, that saves us from building a parking garage, which is $30 (million), potentially $40 million."

He also sees eVTOLs eventually moving cargo across the port.

Like many new capabilities, technology is outpacing the government's regulatory agencies overseeing them. As regulators figure out how eVTOLs can operate in various types of controlled and uncontrolled airspace, Perschbach believes the port is a good venue to help work through some of the nuances.

"We own residential facilities, industrial facilities (and) commercial facilities, so it's a lot easier to do that," he said.

And, since most people at the port work in aviation, engineering and technology, Perschbach believes they may be more open to incorporating eVTOL transportation into their daily routines.

Audience members watch a video during a panel discussion about the future of mobility that was held Friday at Boeing Center at Tech Port on Port San Antonio's campus on the Southwest Side. Photo: Jessica Phelps

"I think it's easier to get them to be early adopters," he said. "And even if some of the early use cases are parking at some of the relatively nearby park and rides, like the Kel-Lac Park and Ride off of (Highway) 90 and moving that relatively short distance to the vertiport on our campus, and that shows a safe, repeatable, consistent, reasonable operation that can then be scaled out."

Vertiport planning

Perschbach and company are building a vertiport, where eVTOLs could operate from, at the port — a process he described as "expensive and slow."

The vertiport will be near the site of the port's futuristic, $300 million office tower that's expected to be complete in 2029. It will be a hub for the craft with infrastructure such as electric chargers. Port officials didn't immediately provide the costs of the facility.

Jim Perschbach, president and CEO of Port San Antonio, speaks Friday about the future of mobility during a panel discussion at Boeing Center at Tech Port on the Port's campus on the Southwest Side. Photo: Jessica Phelps

Site preparation, such as road grading, is projected to cost $10 million, Perschbach said, adding that the work is expected to start next month and take about six months to complete.

"I want this to move as quickly as possible," he said, "one because we have a need for it, but two, we're somewhat in a race to become one of the prove-up environments for these aircraft."

The state's Advanced Air Mobility Advisory Committee, he said, is working with the Texas Legislature to allocate funding to accelerate vertiport infrastructure construction across the state.

"We believe it'll be the first operational and actual, real vertiport probably anywhere in the world," he said. "We're actively looking for operators."

The vision is for Port San Antonio's vertiport to be sort of a hub for eVTOLs that would ferry employees from park-and-rides across the city.

"If we could pick those folks up at (a) park-and-ride and move them to our campus, we not only free up a lot of the immediate parking pressures that are on campus, but we free up having to put tens of millions of dollars of infrastructure into bringing that level of transportation to our campus," he said. "I think there is a clear and compelling immediate need for us to have it."

ABOVE: Christopher Combs of the University of Texas at San Antonio speaks Friday about the future of mobility during a panel discussion at Boeing Center at Tech Port on Port San Antonio's campus on the Southwest Side. Photos: Jessica Phelps

Seeking partners

On Friday, Perschbach joined panelists from academia and industry — including Dan Dalton, vice president of global partnerships at eVTOL maker Wisk Aero — to discuss eVTOLs and the future of advanced air mobility in the region.

Dalton said his company is looking for places to begin establishing its air taxi service.

Wisk, a joint venture with Boeing Co. that's building autonomous eVTOLs, signed a deal in February with the city of Sugar Land, a Houston suburb, to collaborate on establishing a vertiport, along with training and maintenance facilities, at Sugar Land Regional Airport.

The company said Sugar Land would be a gateway to a larger network of routes throughout Houston.

“A lot of people do not want to sit in a car for an hour and a half to two hours just trying to get to downtown Houston if they could make that trip in 10 to 15 minutes,” Dalton said. “So these types of numbers are actually kind of the reality of where we are today as it relates to this new form of mobility.”

Wisk’s aircraft looks like a cross between a car, airplane and helicopter. With 12 electric motors lining the wing’s leading and trailing edges, the autonomous craft can carry up to four people.

The vehicle flies 2,000 to 5,000 feet above the ground, and most trips last 20 to 30 minutes, Dalton said.

Wisk’s sixth-generation aircraft is undergoing Federal Aviation Administration certification, which the company hopes to complete by the end of the decade.

Wisk’s Sugar Land presence largely focuses on infrastructure, Dalton said. It’s looking at power and other ground requirements, as well as doing outreach to let people know the industry is coming.

He said the company is looking for places to operate, though he wouldn’t commit to it landing in San Antonio.

“We’re looking at different markets and the different environments, testing locations, so that when the aircraft is ready to really start doing that robust testing and then entering the service that we’ve got the relationships that we need,” he said. “We’ll see how it all turns out.”