

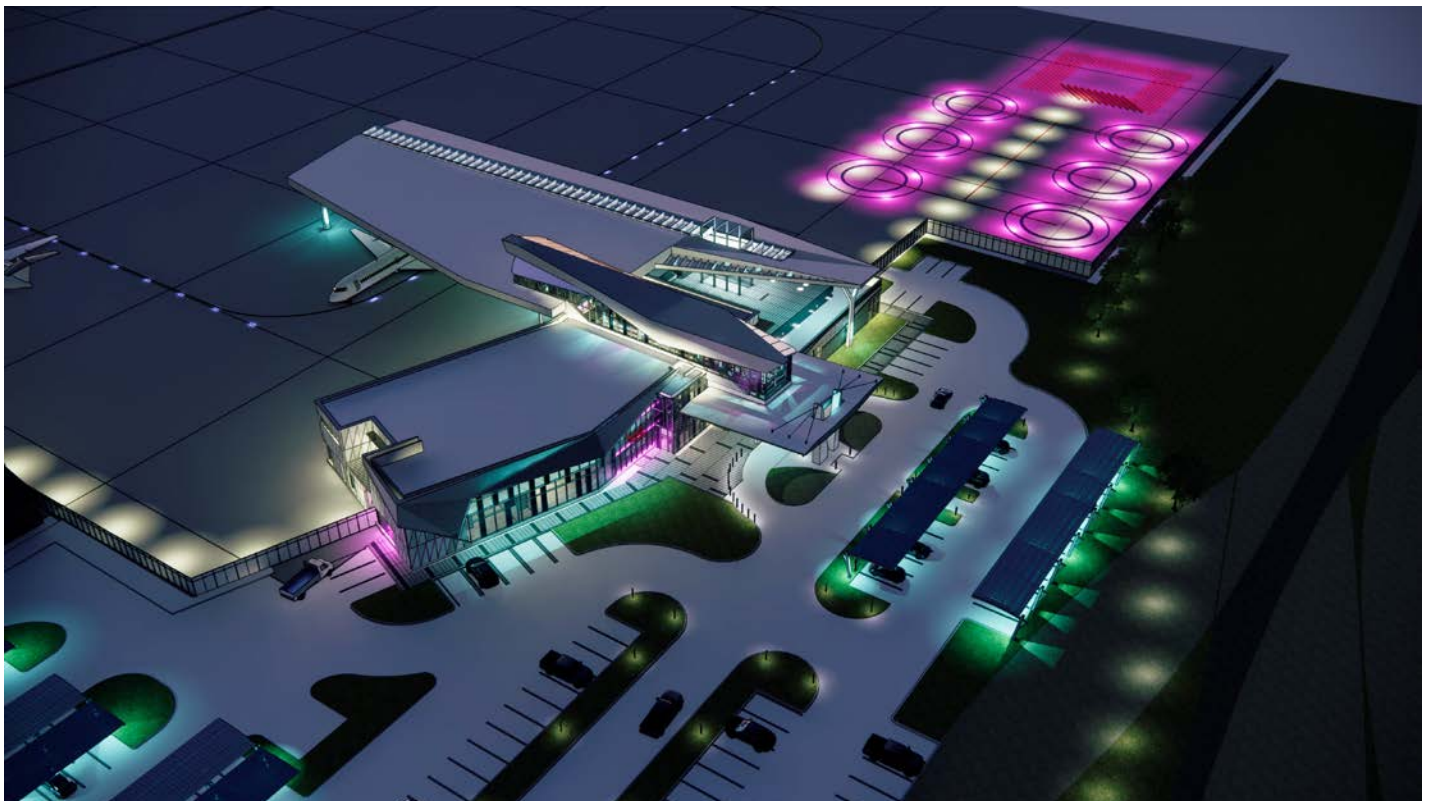
San Antonio Express-News

Think Jetsons: Port San Antonio could be air taxi hub of future

The tech campus is building a vertiport to make the area an Advanced Air Mobility hub

Brandon Lingle – February 21, 2025

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A rendering depicts a vision of a vertiport that's part of Port San Antonio's concept for the Defense Industrial Research Campus of the Future. Credit: Port San Antonio.

If Jim Perschbach has his way, flying cars carrying people and cargo will be zipping across San Antonio's skies within the next decade.

The CEO and president of Port San Antonio has been working for years to make the South Side tech campus a hub for the next generation of air transport. Now, there's a vertiport for such vehicles under construction about a block from his office and he's planning air routes across the region.

The idea is that small craft called eVTOLs — electric vertical takeoff and landing vehicles — will fly people or goods across town, avoiding traffic delays and parking hassles. It's just one of the uses being discussed by regulators, industry and communities as technology forces a reimagining of the nation's air transportation system.



Joby Aviation's prototype aircraft is seen in 2022 at the company's flight test facility. The California company has partnered with Toyota Motor Corp. to develop its eVTOL. Credit: Joby Aviation

“There’s a lot to be worked out with what Advanced Air Mobility is actually going to work itself into,” Perschbach said, using the term adopted by the Federal Aviation Administration for the industry.

The discussion is larger than eVTOLs. It includes specialized aircraft that have short takeoff and landing distances and those that use alternative fuel sources such as batteries, hybrid-electric and hydrogen-electric.

Initially, such craft will have pilots on board when flying passengers, but the vision is for most to fly autonomously. The FAA is working with aircraft makers on certifications.

The Port is positioned to help lead adoption. While it hasn’t yet partnered with a maker of such aircraft, it’s building

infrastructure, advocating for the technology, participating in policy discussions and planning to bring air taxis to San Antonio.

So far, it’s invested \$13.6 million in site preparation and design for the vertiport where eVTOLs and other craft will operate. The full project is estimated to cost \$102.5 million, but timing depends on federal and state funding.

With the Trump administration and first-buddy Elon Musk promising to streamline federal processes, Advanced Air Mobility may get through some regulatory hurdles more quickly.

“I think this administration is going to be very open to looking at things as they could be instead of how they are,” Perschbach said.

New approach

The new technologies demand a new way of thinking about air travel to reach their potential, he said.

“The value of Advanced Air Mobility is going outside of the way that we’ve traditionally seen aviation and using it to augment the way we’ve thought of municipal transportation,” he said. “It may be VIA who owns a fleet of these aircraft and the price that the consumer pays is subsidized, the same way your bus transit or light rail transit or something like that is paid.”

He pictures a “transportation web” with a fleet of eVTOLs crisscrossing the city.

“In the morning, that aircraft can fly to a park-and-ride up in Cibolo or Universal City or Stone Oak or something and maybe it’s taking people to work, and then it’s moving people from somewhere to a hospital or to a mall or a shopping center,” Perschbach said. “That night there’s a Spurs game, so it starts moving people back and forth to either the Frost Bank center or the new Marvel stadium.”

While the technology allows more flexibility, much work remains to figure out the safety, air space and operating rules for the flying taxis.

“To do that requires somewhat of a reimagining and a reregulation of airspace rules, because you don’t want to interfere with other traffic, it requires a reimagining and a recertification of who’s an operator,” he said.

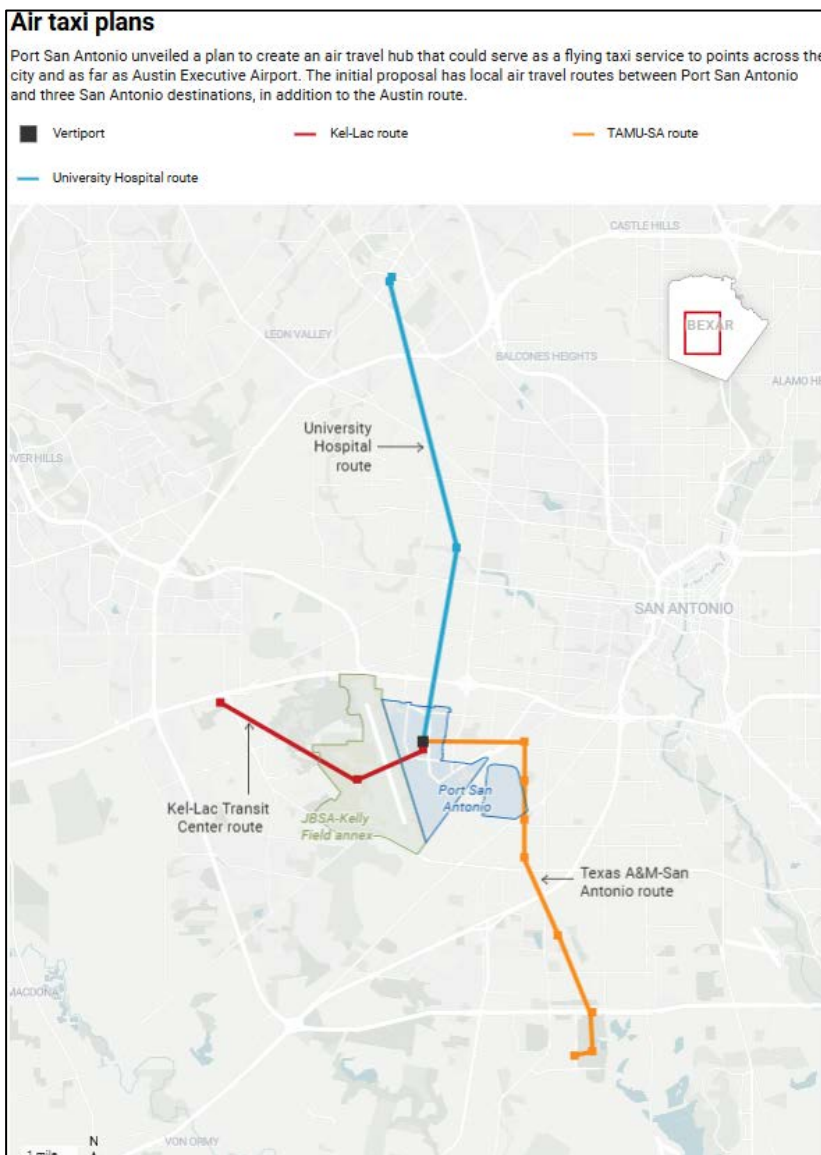
There are also security concerns and the work of getting people comfortable with the idea of flying in an aircraft with no pilot on board.



The future site of Port San Antonio's vertiport is seen in January. Credit: Port San Antonio

Route plans

A recent Port-commissioned study of the market identified several routes that could be served by such aircraft.



In one to five years, it found, an electric airplane could be ferrying up to 30 passengers to Austin Executive Airport in about 45 minutes. Further out, in three to five years, eVTOLs could be flying routes across town.

At the top of the list is a run between VIA’s Kel-Lac Transit Center at 7183 U.S. 90 and Port San Antonio on which eVTOLs would carry from three to five passengers on a five- to seven-minute trip. With 18,000 people working at the Port, Perschbach said such a route would cut traffic and save people time.

A route between Texas A&M San Antonio and the Port, also with piloted eVTOLs, could spur collaboration between the Port’s tenants and academia.

But those would only be the first.

“Those routes from here to Kel-Lac, here to A&M San Antonio, provide just a treasure of lessons learned and proof of concept and the ability to do something repeatedly, efficiently ... in airspace that gets you basically everything you could possibly fly over — industrial, residential, commercial, highway,” he said.

A route between University Hospital and Port San Antonio would help provide emergency medical transport with specialized piloted eVTOLs.

For cargo operations, the Port intends to have various stops across its campus.

Next steps

“We’re already moving the dirt for the vertiport and consolidated facilities,” Perschbach said.

Completion of the project will move the Port toward its goal to become an FAA-designated Advanced Air Mobility Test Site in the next few years.

Perschbach also wants to see the FAA move forward on its Center for Advanced Aviation Technologies. Mandated by law last year, the FAA is reviewing proposals for the center that must be established by October 2026.

“My understanding is Senator Cruz was instrumental in putting that together,” he said. “I’d love to see that come to Texas. I don’t think it’s likely that the center would be designated in San Antonio, really, but I think it’s very likely that San Antonio will be seen as one of the test locations for that.”



An electric vertical takeoff and landing — eVTOL — aircraft, flies above Joby eVTOLs on the tarmac in New York in this 2023 file photo. Bebetto Matthews/Associated Press file photo

Meanwhile, the Port is doing all it can to be ready to allow eVTOLs and other types of autonomous craft to fly as soon as they're legally allowed to. In the near term, Perschbach said he hoped to see large drones — up to 500 pounds — moving around the Port.

“But the one I really want is to get a level of air taxi, which is aircraft that you can put human beings on, and to prove that up,” he said. “Proving that you can do this in terms of moving people around is a completely different operation.”

Perschbach, who sits on the Texas Transportation Commission's Advanced Air Mobility Advisory Committee, isn't just dreaming. Major global transportation and aviation companies are planning for such a future and some are already eyeing San Antonio.



Heavy equipment prepares the future site of Port San Antonio's vertiport in November. Credit: Port San Antonio.

Lilium, a German aerospace company, has said it intends to have its eVTOLs flying in Texas by 2026 and serving metros including San Antonio by the next decade.

Toyota Motor Corp., whose U.S. operations are based in Texas and that operates an auto manufacturing plant in San Antonio, has partnered with Joby Aviation to develop an electric eVTOL. In October, Toyota said it was increasing its investment in Joby to \$894 million.

United Airlines has partnered with Archer Aviation on an eVTOL program they say will help address congestion challenges around major airports.

In May, an exec from eVTOL maker Wisk Aero joined Perschbach on a panel about flying taxis. The company is a joint venture with Boeing Co., which has thousands of workers at the Port. Wisk is building a vertiport in Sugar Land, outside Houston, and looking for other places to operate but hadn't committed to San Antonio.