

AIR MOBILITY AND AVIATION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TASK FORCE

Minutes of the 2nd Meeting of the 2025 Interim

September 16, 2025

Call to Order and Roll Call

The second meeting of the Air Mobility and Aviation Economic Development Task Force was held on September 16, 2025, at 3:00 PM in Room 149 of the Capitol Annex.

Representative Stephanie Dietz, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Representative Stephanie Dietz, Co-Chair; Senator Brandon J. Storm, Co-Chair; Senators Greg Elkins, and Matt Nunn; and Representatives John Hodgson, Rachel Roarx, and Aaron Thompson.

Guests: Jonathan Dixon, Executive Director, Kentucky Aviation Association (KAA); Tristan Durbin, Manager, Owensboro/Daviess County Regional Airport, Board President, KAA; Dusty McCoy, Legislative Chair, KAA; Dr. Tim Holt, Chair, Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) School of Aviation; Houston Glass, Aviation Instructor, EKU; Amy Scarborough, Government Relations Officer, EKU; Dr. Ryan Quarles, President, Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS); Dr. Cary Castle, President, Sommerset Community College (SCC); Dr. Cynthia Kelley, President, Madisonville Community College (MCC); Tina Nance, Director, Aviation Museum of Kentucky (AMK); Ron McBride, Chair, AMK; Sarah Wood, Babbage Cofounder; and Etain Connor, Director, Community Affairs, FEAM Aero.

LRC Staff: John Snyder, Dana Fugazzi, Austin Johnson, Ashley Nash, and Angela Rhodes.

Approval of July 14, 2025, minutes

The minutes for the July 14, 2025, meeting were approved.

Kentucky Aviation Association

Johnathan Dixon, Executive Director, KAA; Tristan Durbin, Manager, Owensboro/Daviess County Regional Airport, Board President, KAA; and Dusty McCoy, Legislative Chair, KAA, briefed the committee. Kentucky has more than 50 public use general aviation airports. General aviation supports business, tourism, agriculture, medical and emergency services, and also connects rural communities to state, national, and international markets. Each year, aviation contributes over \$1.6 billion to Kentucky's economy, supports more than 9,400 jobs, provides over \$400 million in labor income, and generates vital tax revenue.

Mr. McCoy requested the continuation of funding for the general aviation airports to ensure operational stability for small and rural airports, and promote aviation accessibility, education, and safety statewide. He also requested an adjustment to KRS 65A.020 and 65A.030 for small airports to simplify the audit processes and reduce the administrative burden.

The KAA endorses long-term funding for general aviation, which includes a sustainable funding model for general aviation infrastructure, a plan for maintenance, safety upgrades, and growth, and a plan that ensures the adequate support for all Kentucky airports. A request was also made to fund the AERO Act, an act relating to aerospace infrastructure, which includes securing resources to support aviation and innovation, and enhance Kentucky's competitiveness in aviation.

Senator Nunn inquired about audit requirements and demands on small airport's time and finances. He requested that KAA bring specific suggestions on how to improve the audit process.

In response to Chair Dietz, Mr. McCoy stated the estimated average cost of an audit can run between \$10,000 to \$20,000 and has been known to run as high as \$40,000, which is more than some smaller general aviation airport's yearly operational budget.

In response to Senator Nunn, Mr. McCoy stated there are safety audits done by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), however, the financial audits are an issue.

Eastern Kentucky University

Dr. Tim Holt, Chair, ECU School of Aviation; Houston Glass, Aviation Instructor, ECU; and Amy Scarborough, Government Relations Officer, ECU, briefed the task force on ECU's aviation programs. A new ECU flight school building is being built at the Central Kentucky Regional Airport with an approximate completion date of the 2026 school year. Dr. Holt stated the investment will transform aviation education and workforce development, which is critical for national airspace and infrastructure.

ECU's aviation program enrollment is up over 150 percent since 2018. Of the enrollees, 85 percent are Kentuckians. The program has four main concentrations: professional flight, aerospace management, unmanned aircraft systems, and aerospace technology, which are all sectors that need support and workforce development in the national infrastructure. The ECU program has a post-graduation placement rate around 95 to 100 percent. Future ECU programs include an aviation dispatch program, a minor in aviation safety, and a masters in aeronautical sciences.

Dr. Holt stated the demand for air traffic controllers is high and there is currently a critical shortage. Mr. Glass added that ECU is capable of starting an air traffic control program if awarded the opportunity. To offer such a program, ECU will need around \$1.5 million annually with a startup cost of \$5 million. The aviation program is also struggling with an aged aircraft fleet which requires an increased level of maintenance.

Co-Chair Storm encouraged members to visit ECU and their aviation program. In response to Co-Chair Storm, Ms. Scarborough stated the Council on Postsecondary Education's study is expected to be completed prior to session.

In response to Senator Nunn, Dr. Holt stated aviation dispatch certification and air traffic controller certification is different. Air traffic controllers work in a tower at an airport. A dispatcher could work for an airline or airport as part of flight profile optimization. In response to a follow-up question, Mr. Glass stated financial aid is available but most fees are paid with the help of parents and traditional student loans. Co-Chair Storm reminded members of the AERO Act, which includes scholarship funds for students.

In response to Representative Roarx, Ms. Scarborough said figures listed in the presentation are the total combined request for aviation education.

In response to Chair Dietz, Dr. Holt stated most program graduates are placed within the Commonwealth.

Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS)

Dr. Ryan Quarles, President, KCTCS, briefed the task force on KCTCS. Enrollment at KCTCS is up 6.5 percent and around 70 percent of their students graduate with no student loan debt. KCTCS is expanding their aviation education offerings across the state including programs at MCC, West Kentucky Community and Technical College, SCC, and Maysville Community and Technical College. Dr. Quarles added that aviation programs are expensive technical programs to offer, however, enrollment is up nearly 25 percent.

Dr. Cary Castle, President, SCC, spoke about their aviation maintenance technology (AMT) program, an affordable FAA approved two-year program. These are valuable degrees. Students typically start at a high rate of pay, as there is great workforce demand for certified aircraft mechanics. Dr. Castle stated the need for updated equipment to continue to adequately train students.

Dr. Cynthia Kelley, President, MCC, briefed the task force on their fixed wing aviation program. The program began development in 2017, was fully operational in 2021, and is now at capacity. MCC has the only associate degree flight and helicopter programs in the state, with a 95 percent first-time pass rate for first attempt check rides.

Co-Chair Storm complimented KCTCS and encouraged members to visit these community colleges.

Aviation Museum of Kentucky

Tina Nance, Director, AMK; Ron McBride, Chair, AMK; and Sarah Wood, Babbage Cofounder, briefed the task force on the museum's programming, education initiatives, and new museum location and concept. Mr. McBride emphasized the importance of introducing the aviation industry to children while they are young to garner interest in a potential career in aviation. The new museum building will become the Kentucky Aerospace Education Center. This facility will house the new educational hub, the aviation hall of fame, and the AMK. This is a reimagining of the museum and its role in the state for aviation education and workforce development. The aviation museum is requesting an investment of \$4 million.

Ms. Nance thanked the General Assembly for their continued support and specifically thanked Representative Gordon.

FEAM Aero

Etain Connor, Director, Community Affairs, FEAM Aero, discussed their workforce development and training needs. FEAM Aero is based in Miami, Florida, but their largest facility is located in the Commonwealth at CVG airport. Ms. Connor expressed gratitude to the General Assembly for the ease of getting FEAM Aero's CVG hanger built and staffed. The biggest issue facing FEAM Aero is the lack of workforce availability and the average age of aircraft mechanics. Many aircraft mechanics are older and starting to retire in large numbers. Ms. Connor emphasized the importance of starting education and presenting opportunities to children at a young age. Another problem is a lack of FAA designated mechanic examiners. The FAA determines when and where these inspectors are certified. The delay in approval by the FAA is an issue, as well as financial barriers to entry. Mechanics are required to purchase a starter tool kit which can cost upwards of \$2,500. FEAM Aero also has a need for transitional housing for new mechanics looking to move to the Commonwealth.

In response to Senator Nunn, Ms. Connor stated mechanic work needs to be completed at an airport and terminal as the cost to move the planes to another location is too high.

Adjournment

With no further business to come before the task force, Chair Dietz adjourned the meeting

at 4:23 PM.