

impact**AIR**:

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE
TO TRANSFORM AIRPORTS
FROM TRANSIT POINTS
TO ECONOMIC
GROWTH ENGINES



impact**AIR**

POWERED BY Golden Shovel

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ABOUT GOLDEN SHOVEL AGENCY

Golden Shovel Agency (GSA) brings creative energy to the work of economic development. Whether the goal is attracting and supporting great businesses or talent, we are specialists in your world. We've helped more than 300 communities across North America shape and tell their stories, to strengthen the vitality of their regional economies. Our core services include branding, marketing, strategy, web development, and online communications. More than that, we are a true partner to our clients.

GOLDEN SHOVEL EXPERIENCE HIGHLIGHTS

17

Years in
Business

400+

Projects
Completed

43

States

7+

Countries

95%

Client Retention
Rate

45+

Team
Members

7+

Years Average
Employee Tenure

56%

Faster Website
Launch Times

AWARDS WON



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Kresha is the Chief Financial Officer and a founding member of Golden Shovel Agency, where he combines entrepreneurial vision with financial expertise to empower communities for long-term success. With a strong focus on strategy and innovation, Ron oversees financial operations, analyzes economic trends, and leads unique projects that enhance the agency's impact. In addition to his work with Golden Shovel, Ron is a passionate private pilot and advocate for the value of airports in economic development. A former Mayor and Minnesota State Representative, Ron has unique insights on the powerful connection between airports of all sizes and the vitality of their communities. He has spoken frequently about the subject, most recently in presentations to the Arizona Association for Economic Development and the Arizona Airports Association.

For more about Ron visit: goldenshovelagency.com.



INTRODUCTION

Crawford County Airport (RSV), near the town of Robinson, in southeastern Illinois was preparing for the future. The airport layout plan (ALP) called for additional support, runway improvements, instrument approach plans and electric charging stations. Community leaders recognized the need for a modern, future-ready airport to support corporate travel, community use, and air medical services, and they were shaping an innovative vision that included becoming the first airport in the state to offer a charging station for electric aircraft.

On March 31, 2023, at approximately 9:30 p.m. an unwelcome guest arrived. An EF3 tornado destroyed every building on the airfield along with 19 airplanes, many of which were scattered across the grounds. And yet, even amid the debris left behind by the disaster, Crawford County Airport found hope and opportunity. Because they had already been planning for the future, airport leaders, the Illinois State Department of Transportation, and the federal government were able to rebuild the facility. Not just to its former standard, but into a forward-looking airport that will meet the needs of the community well into the future.

In November of 2025, more than two years after the disaster, Crawford County Airport unveiled a \$3.8 million terminal building, the final piece of a rebuild that included new facilities and

infrastructure designed to continue reimagining aviation services.

The success of Crawford County offers a useful guide to communities with airports of all sizes. Airport renovation requires a dedicated, deliberate effort that cannot be put off. And while most communities won't have to weather a destructive tornado, the fact that Crawford County was already creating its vision for the future, both accelerated their recovery and allowed them to avoid the mistake of rebuilding for existing needs, rather than considering what they might require five, 10, or 20 years from now.

That kind of forward-looking vision is more essential than ever, because transportation services, including aviation, are likely to see more change in the next 10 to 15 years than they have experienced in all of aviation history. And these rapid changes will create a much bigger storm for communities who are unprepared for next-generation aviation.

Chief among the disruptions on the horizon is Advanced Air Mobility (AAM), which includes autonomous, hybrid-electric, hydrogen powered, and electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) aircraft housing and operations. AAM is currently an \$11-\$16 billion industry globally and it's expected to grow to **\$115 billion in the United States alone by 2035**, as the population increasingly turns to futuristic solutions like autonomous electric aircraft to enhance personal mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Early AAM operations are expected to include piloted eVTOL aircraft and use charted routes rather than dedicated AAM corridors. They will likely rely on existing two-way radio communication and require robust ground charging resources at existing airfields, heliports and vertiports that have been modified to meet their specific needs. Because of the specialized fire risk associated with battery-powered vehicles, these aircraft will also require firefighting services capable of combatting fires in battery and hydrogen systems.

For many communities we have visited, simply keeping up with demand for T-hangar space for general aviation is the priority, but failing to plan for future aircraft requirements risks being left behind.

Southwest Ohio provides one example of a region positioning itself as the national leader in next-gen aviation. Butler County and Middletown Regional Airports, Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, Butler Tech, and industry leaders have formed a collaborative effort to align education and career development to meet the needs of AAM.¹

¹ <https://miamioh.edu/aspire/miami-difference/stories-2025/advanced-air-mobility-hub.html>



“THE FACT THAT CRAWFORD COUNTY WAS ALREADY CREATING ITS VISION FOR THE FUTURE, BOTH ACCELERATED THEIR RECOVERY AND ALLOWED THEM TO AVOID THE MISTAKE OF REBUILDING FOR EXISTING NEEDS, RATHER THAN CONSIDERING WHAT THEY MIGHT REQUIRE FIVE, 10, OR 20 YEARS FROM NOW.”

INTRODUCTION

The Federal Aviation Administration is a Good Place to Start Preparing

Since the early 2000s, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has recognized that a legacy National Airspace System (NAS) rooted in mid-20th-century technology would be inadequate to accommodate projected growth in demand, rising complexity, and emerging aviation sectors. Severe congestion and costly delays in the late 1990s and early 2000s galvanized government, industry, and public stakeholders to pursue a transformative solution for U.S. air transportation. This led to congressional authorization of a multi-agency effort and the creation of the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen), a comprehensive modernization initiative designed to reposition the NAS for future requirements. The FAA, in partnership with other federal entities, has since used research, feasibility studies, stakeholder collaboration, and iterative development to modernize core systems and establish a foundation for adaptive future operations. Such structured evolution of NextGen highlights that the FAA is not merely reacting to present needs, but proactively architecting a system capable of responding to future industry disruptions, increasing capacity and flexibility while preserving safety.²

Today, NextGen capabilities are embedded within the NAS, with digital communications, satellite-based navigation, and enhanced

surveillance improving efficiency, precision, and predictability of operations. Through continuous collaboration with international partners and alignment with global air navigation evolution, the FAA is preparing US aviation infrastructure for technological disruption—from increased unmanned traffic to AAM—ensuring airports, operators, and communities remain resilient as demand patterns and aerospace innovations evolve.

As the residents of Crawford County know, a single stormy night can present unanticipated challenges. But because Crawford County was preparing for the future, that tornado, while destructive, did not cripple the community permanently. In fact, because of the planning and relationships already in place, the county's rebuild allowed the airport to come out better positioned than it was before the storm.

If your elected officials and community leaders are not planning for coming aeronautical advancements, your community could miss a tremendous economic opportunity. Now is the time to revisit or create a vision and master plan for infrastructure and a strategic aviation attraction marketing plan. If you are ready, let this whitepaper be a starting point or source of inspiration.

2 <https://www.faa.gov/nextgen/background/forming>