AAM Planning Program Application Form 2026

Row 4

Date of Application	07/10/26 1:47 PM
Organization	Southwestern RPO
Organization type	RPO
If other, please specify.	
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Project name	Southwestern RPO AAM Planning Proposal
Planning context statement	Western North Carolina's mountainous terrain creates unique transportation challenges that make the region well-suited for Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) planning. Steep topography, winding road networks, and limited route redundancy often isolate communities and significantly increase emergency response times. These challenges were magnified following Hurricane Helene, when widespread flooding, bridge washouts, landslides, roadway failures, and communications failures disrupted access to entire communities and demonstrated the vulnerability of relying solely on ground transportation. In many locations, emergency responders were forced to navigate damaged infrastructure or take lengthy detours to reach residents in need. Horses and all-terrain vehicles were often the only option to reach people. Beyond major disasters, the region experiences recurring transportation challenges that could benefit from future AAM applications. Wildfires, severe weather events, and seasonal flooding can quickly limit roadway access, while the area's extensive outdoor recreation destinations frequently require technical rescue operations for injured hikers, climbers, or individuals who have fallen from waterfalls or cliffs in remote locations. These incidents often occur in areas where terrain and limited road access delay emergency response and patient transport. At the same time, Western North Carolina presents significant opportunities to evaluate how AAM technologies could complement existing transportation and emergency management systems. Regional planning can help identify high-priority use cases such as emergency medical response, disaster

	assessment, infrastructure inspection, delivery of critical supplies to isolated communities, and improved coordination among public safety agencies. By proactively planning for AAM, the region can strengthen transportation system resilience, improve emergency preparedness, and develop a framework for integrating emerging aviation technologies into future mobility and public safety strategies.
Local commitment & capacity	The participating Rural Planning Organizations are committed to supporting the AAM planning process through dedicated staff, regional coordination, and established partnerships with local, regional, state, and federal stakeholders. Staff will provide project management, facilitate coordination among participating agencies, assist with stakeholder engagement, and support data collection and analysis. The RPOs have extensive experience convening multidisciplinary committees, including local governments, emergency management, public safety agencies, airports, NCDOT, and regional partners. The RPO Staff can also assist with compiling available data and inventorying existing planning documents. All three RPOs are housed within regional Councils of Government; there are additional staff resources available who have extensive experience administering grant funds and coordinating planning processes.
Project partners	The Southwestern RPO, Foothills RPO, and Land of Sky RPO are partnering on the AAM application, with the Southwestern RPO serving as the administrative entity. During the planning process, additional partners may include town and county staff, emergency managers, disaster recovery experts, first responders, law enforcement, healthcare providers, airport managers, United States Forest Service, NC State Parks, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Duke Energy, Tennessee Valley Authority, the French Broad River MPO, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, NCDOT Division staff, and others.
Partner roles	Partners involved in responding to emergencies will help inform the planning team what and where they experience the greatest difficulties and gaps in service. They will help focus the plan on real-world problems that need solutions. As partners learn about potential AAM technologies and how they could be implemented, they will help prioritize solutions that will make their operations more successful and efficient.
Regional collaboration	Western North Carolina has a long history of strong regional collaboration born out of extreme necessity. Situated far away from the state capital with no major metropolitan areas, the rural and isolated nature of the region means that we pool our limited resources, work together, and help each other out at every opportunity. The three RPOs are located within Regional Councils of Government (COGs), which have a strong existing coordination structure throughout the region. The COGs have a 60-year history of working for the people in this region and have built long-standing, trusted relationships, enabling us to convene stakeholders for collaborative input. The three RPOs also have a strong collaborative working relationship with each other and with our respective member governments. We can leverage established communication channels with our Technical Coordinating Committees, Transportation Advisory Committees, and NCDOT Divisions. Regular stakeholder meetings, workshops, and data-sharing will ensure the plan reflects regional priorities, strengthens interagency coordination, and identifies practical AAM applications that support transportation resilience, emergency response, and rural mobility.

Integration with existing/future planning efforts	The AAM planning effort will establish a foundation for incorporating Advanced Air Mobility into the region's ongoing transportation planning activities. This represents the first coordinated regional effort to evaluate how AAM technologies could support mobility, emergency response, and infrastructure resilience in Western North Carolina. The Southwestern RPO is beginning a regional Comprehensive Transportation Plan for the six far western counties in the fall of 2026, presenting an ideal opportunity to incorporate the AAM plan into the regional transportation plan. The French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization is also pursuing AAM planning, presenting a unique opportunity to coordinate efforts across rural and metropolitan areas. While each planning organization serves different geographic areas and transportation needs, collaboration will allow the region to share data, align planning strategies, identify complementary use cases, and develop a more cohesive vision for AAM across Western North Carolina. By taking a proactive planning approach, the region can identify practical applications, engage a broad range of stakeholders, and prepare for emerging transportation technologies before they become critical needs. Recommendations will inform future Comprehensive Transportation Plans (CTPs), long-range transportation plans, multimodal studies, emergency preparedness initiatives, and other regional planning efforts.
Funding requested from NCDOT	$216,000.00
Local match	10%
Source(s) of local match	Local match funds will be provided by the Southwestern Commission Council of Government, Land of Sky Regional Council, and Foothills Regional Commission.
Participation acknowledgement	☑
Additional commitment or innovation	Many western North Carolina counties are beginning to use drones in their emergency management efforts to some extent. A regional planning effort would increase efficiency and enable a more strategic approach to implementation. Rather than each county having to figure it out on its own, we could boost the capacity for the entire region and expedite solutions that could save lives when the next disaster occurs.
Supporting Documents	
Additional documents attached?	☐
Total project cost	$240,000.00
Single or Joint Application	Joint applicant (two or more co-applicants)
co-applicants	Foothills RPO and Land of Sky RPO