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Airports, Engineers and the FAA: A New Way Forward

With record FAA funding now locked in through 2028, airports have a rare opportunity to modernize—but only if industry and regulators can close the growing gap between legislation and execution, a challenge the Airport Consultants Council is tackling through a new, collaborative model with the FAA.

Bryan Hafertepe, T.J. Schulz, Peter Kirsch, Ally Fields Jan. 25, 2026 5 min read

Five things you'll learn

- Why FAA reauthorization success now hinges on implementation, not funding—and where projects are most at risk of delay.
- How the Airport Consultants Council's Reauthorization Task Force is reshaping FAA–industry coordination beyond traditional advocacy.
- What new Reauthorization Program Guidance Letters (R-PGLs) mean in practice for AIP grants, NEPA reviews and civil-rights compliance.

Bryan Hafertepe

When Congress passed the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, it delivered five years of record infrastructure funding through 2028. Airports now have predictable capital to plan long-term, modernize aging systems and build for future demand. But across the country, airports are adjusting to new statutory requirements while the FAA's Office of Airports faces retirements, staffing shortages and a widening portfolio of responsibilities. The gap between legislative intent and on-the-ground execution could impact projects, create inconsistencies across regional offices and strain already thin timelines.

An industry-led effort is working to change that trajectory.

The Airport Consultants Council (ACC) Reauthorization Task Force, formed before the reauthorization bill passed, has emerged as a model for how public and private expertise can work in lockstep to translate policy into progress. The group has spent the past year identifying urgent implementation needs, flagging inconsistencies and collaborating directly with FAA policymakers to smooth the path from law to runway.

FAA Reauthorization

What is the biggest obstacle to turning FAA reauthorization funding into on-time airport projects?

- ◯ Inconsistent FAA regional interpretations
- ◯ Staffing shortages and retirements at the FAA
- ◯ Unclear or evolving guidance documents
- ◯ Airport capacity and local approval constraints

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"Airports have the funding and vision to grow, but progress only happens when everyone – from the engineers on the ground to the policymakers in Washington – works from the same playbook," said Bryan Hafertepe, associate principal and COO of Connico and an ACC committee member.

Turning legislation into real-time coordination

ACC created the task force in anticipation of reauthorization, aiming to unify member input and articulate industry-wide priorities. When the bill passed, instead of disbanding, the group shifted immediately to implementation.

"A number of our recommendations were incorporated into the bill," said T.J. Schulz, ACC president. "But where this group really stands out is what happened next. We stayed engaged to make sure those reforms reached the airports they were designed to help."

“We told the FAA, ‘Here are the provisions that matter most right now, and here’s how to implement them efficiently.’ That was a novel approach,” said Peter Kirsch, partner at Kaplan Kirsch.

The result has been a streamlined feedback loop that offers federal policymakers a direct line to on-the-ground realities and offers airports more timely clarification than in past reauthorization cycles.

Translating policy into progress

The FAA has issued a new slate of Reauthorization Program Guidance Letters (R-PGLs), designed to clarify Airport Improvement Program funding, environmental requirements and civil-rights provisions.

The task force’s partnership with the FAA has already produced tangible shifts in how the agency rolls out new requirements. The task force has provided early input on updates to the AIP Handbook and NEPA processes, aiming to reduce

“We can identify when one region interprets a rule differently than another,” Schulz said. “And we are working collaboratively with the FAA to resolve it.”

Taken together, these efforts aim to help airports overcome administrative uncertainty and move projects forward despite internal agency transitions.

Filling critical institutional knowledge gaps

As the FAA experiences generational turnover, the loss of decades of institutional knowledge could reshape how quickly the agency can respond to inquiries, process grants and issue clarifications. Industry experts, many of

system from outside,"said Ally Fields, Crawford, Murphy & Tilly's government affairs lead and chair of ACC's Advocacy Committee.

Kirsch agrees: "In many respects, ACC members are the best substitute for the agency's living memory. We remember what worked, what didn't and why."

This continuity has supported FAA personnel as they navigate complex statutory changes while ensuring airports, consultants and engineers get consistent answers that align with past precedent and current law.

"Every improvement in how these programs are implemented affects the traveler. The smoother the process, the sooner airports can modernize and better serve their communities," Hafertepe said.

Building a permanent model for federal-industry collaboration

Recognizing the ongoing need for structured coordination, the task force is transitioning into a permanent ACC Policy Committee. Its purpose is to maintain continuous dialogue with FAA leadership, ensure consistent interpretation of federal guidance and help translate future legislative mandates into clear, actionable processes.

"We're proving that sustained dialogue, engagement and collaboration, not one-off advocacy, is how real change happens," Schulz said.

Beyond aviation, this structure could serve as a template for other federal agencies managing multiyear infrastructure programs. The model combines real-world expertise with policymaking to reduce delays and improve the return on federal investment.

"This isn't about influence; it's about alignment," Hafertepe said. "When we align expertise with public priorities, everyone wins – the agency, the airports and the traveling public."

About the Author

Bryan Hafertepe

COO AND PROJECT SPECIALIST

Bryan Hafertepe, PE, COO and Project Specialist, is a licensed professional engineer focused on cost...

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T.J. Schulz

T.J. Schulz is president of the Airport Consultants Council (ACC), representing more than 200 member firms advancing airport...

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Peter Kirsch

Ally Fields

Ally Fields leads government affairs for Crawford, Murphy & Tilly and chairs the Airport Consultants Council's (ACC) Advocacy...

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Financing Latin America’s Next Regional Fleet

Fleet modernization in Latin America now hinges on capital, not capability.

Manuel Acosta Dec. 23, 2025 7 min read

Latin America’s regional aviation sector has always balanced geography against economics. Vast distances, mountainous terrain, and limited infrastructure mean that connectivity often depends on small, rugged aircraft that can operate where larger turboprops cannot. From Patagonia to the Amazon, the aircraft that matter most are not necessarily the biggest, they are the most practical.

The sub-19-seat market, for some decades, quietly served diverse industries, medical transport, and the remote communities. Yet, while local operators are

Nineteen seats are more than a seating layout; they are a business model attuned to the regional economics. These aircraft provide operators with access to low-density routes that are otherwise uneconomical, support smaller and more agile crews, and can fly from unpaved, short, or high-altitude runways prevalent in Latin America. In the market segment, operators enjoy the best balance among payload, cost, and regulatory convenience. To financiers, however, the segment is a zone that cannot be easily underwritten: tiny fleets, seasonal demand, and slim liquidity in the secondary market.

Latin American fleet outlook

On the continent, regional operators are still flying planes first delivered over forty years ago. The CASA 212 is still an established workhorse in civil and utility applications yet experiences increasing inefficiency and parts shortages. The Embraer EMB-110 Bandeirante, centrally important in regional connectivity in the past, has become expensive to support.

Early Twin Otter Series 100 and 300 models remain unsurpassed in short-field performance but are coming to an economic end-of-life. Recent arrivals such as the Cessna 408 SkyCourier possess modern systems and useful payload but are designed for standardized logistics and lack multi-mission versatility.

They have done a good job servicing the industry, but by 2025, most are dealing with structural fatigue, outdated avionics, and growing regulations that will soon bring their useful life to an end. It's more than modernization: it's maintaining irreplaceable access to remote areas.

The next generation of aircraft

Among the latest generation of 19-seat planes, the Let L-410 NG can be cited as one of the most comprehensive developments of the type. Based on a platform well proven in more than 50 nations, the NG version combines new GE H85

– typically below 800 meters – is especially well-suited for Latin American terrain from the Andes up to the Caribbean. In contrast with older-generation contenders, the L-410 NG offers noticeable direct operating cost savings, more reliable maintenance intervals, and suitability with the latest avionics and safety technologies; all features gaining increased preference from insurers and financiers alike.

The financial bottleneck

The obstacle to fleet modernization isn't a lack of operational imperative or market demand, it's access to capital. Most regional operators are healthy, well-run companies with stable local demand. Even so, they are burdened with structural handicaps that inhibit them from obtaining capital.

High local rates make debt projections challenging even before accounting for foreign exchange. Most are acquired in U.S. dollars, while operators' income streams are in local currencies that move extensively against the dollar. The differential increases the risk of repayment and thwarts long-term projections. At the same time, lessors and financiers commonly employ conservative estimates of residual values suitable for smaller utility planes, circumscribing loan-to-value ratios and short leases.

Operators are ready and willing to upgrade, but the regional-finance model keeps them locked in the older, less efficient, and more expensive-to-maintain planes. To break that pattern, we're in need of some innovative application of export-credit guarantees, local joint ventures, and more lenient collateral and credit analysis.

Paths that are working

Although bank debt in the classical sense is still restricted, alternative structures are coming up with some positive outcomes. Manufacturer-backed financing

National Bank for Economic and Social Development) have also started realizing the economic value of airlinks and the environmental advantage of fleet modernization.

Power-by-the-hour maintenance-based operating leases are gaining favor and are also reducing maintenance and residual risks. Sale-leaseback deals have also become a useful method for existing asset-owning operators looking to unlock their capital and financing fresh deliveries.

The key for financers is clarity. Operators who can show reliable usage, stable agreements, and disciplined maintenance administration are the ones that are likely to access funds at beneficial conditions. The more reliable the information becomes throughout the region, confidence in the segment should follow suit.

The 19-Seat aircraft ecosystem

When it comes to options for renewal, the regional discourse revolves largely around the Let L-410 NG, the Cessna SkyCourier, the Twin Otter Series 400, and the classic CASA 212. None replace the other, but their comparative economics speak volumes.

Let L-410 NG

Through pressurization, electronic avionics, and real short-field experience, the L-410 NG is a well-rounded platform in its segment. It's more than 2-ton payload, range, and short-runway performance from unpaved terrain below the height of 800 meters are ideally suited for its commercial and government applications.

Cessna 408 Sky

A capable unpressurized twin for convenience and cargo flexibility. It fares well in standardized logistics but requires longer runways and less passenger

Still unmatched for ultra-short operations, though its higher acquisition cost and lower cruise speeds hinder economy in regional routes.

CASA 212 and EMB-110

Reliable but obsolescent, with increasing overhaul and parts expense offsetting dispatchability. Refurbishment can buy time, but the economics rarely compare with a new aircraft.

On a comparative lifecycle basis, the L-410 NG combines mission versatility with consistent operating costs and production regularity; significant considerations for operators and financiers targeting reassurance in provision for the future in support and residual value.

Developing a renewal strategy

Success in renewal for small and mid-sized operators relies as much on structure as does fleet choice. A financial plan starts with plausible demand. Routes with a mining, tour, or medevac contract have the utilization stability lenders require in order to estimate the capacity for repayment. Separate from this, and not less important, is clarity in maintenance and utilization data so financiers can estimate risk with precision.

Financial structures suit local circumstances. Successful deals typically involve local capital and manufacturer aid or export-credit financing and short-term working-capital lines for maintenance buffers. Fleet replacement from older in-service planes also requires phased redeployment: staging sales and new deliveries so operational continuity can be maintained with inactive capital kept to the minimum.

Ultimately fleet replacement in Latin America will come less from theoretical supposition and more from the promise of delivering planes as productive

Latin America's light-aircraft market stands at the crossroads. Regional lift demand is growing, fueled by tourism, energy and mining initiatives, but the capital required for fleet modernization remains hard to access. Pragmatic answers will determine the next generation of renewal: short-field, high-utilization airframes and local economics-friendly financing arrangements.

The sub-19-seat segment, with its headliners like the Let L-410 NG, is at the core of that future. It provides the balance of performance, cost, and ruggedness that operators demand, and the operational reliability that financiers are ever more likely to back. Upgrading the region's fleet is no longer a matter of technology or capability; it's a matter of access to capital and the fiscal planning to harness it.

About the Author

Manuel Acosta

CFO

Manuel Acosta is CFO of Aerocardal

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