Canyonlands Regional Airport Board Meeting Minutes - APPROVED

Date: 16 March 2026
Location: Grand County Courthouse – Council Chambers
Time Called to Order: 4:03 p.m.

In attendance: William Hawley, Board Chairman; Rachel Paxman, Board Member; Howard Trenholme, Board Member; Randy Martin; Board Member; AJ Throgmorton, Board Member; Dan Wheeler, Board Member; Jason Taylor, Board Member; Bill Winfield; Grand County Commissioner; Lori Maughan, San Juan County Commissioner; Judd Hill, Lochner;

In attendance on Zoom: Melisa Jeffers, Grand County Economic Development and PR Coordinator

Staff in attendance: Steven Gleason, Airport Director; Stephen Stocks, Grand County Attorney; and Mark Marcum, Airport Operations Manager and ARFF Specialist.

Call to Order

Chair William Hawley called the meeting to order and invited all airport board members and attendees to introduce themselves and state their roles. Prior to introductions, Steven Gleason introduced Mark Marcum as the newly appointed Airport Operations Manager and ARFF Specialist. He noted that Mark will be attending future meetings, particularly to provide input on operations and construction-related updates, and asked for patience as he becomes familiar with his role. It was also noted that an administrative position has been filled, with the new hire expected to begin on March 23 and be introduced at a future meeting.

Introductions were then conducted around the table. Present were Steven Gleason, Airport Director; Jason Taylor, Board Member and MCD liaison; Randy Martin, Board Member; Rachel Paxman, Board Member; Howard Trenholme, Board Member; Lori Maughan, San Juan County Commissioner Liaison; Stephen Stocks, County Attorney; Bill Winfield, Grand County Commissioner and Board Liaison; Alli Finlayson, FBO Representative; Dan Wheeler, Board Member; AJ Throgmorton, Board Member; Luke Schmidt, Consultant with L.B. Schmidt & Associates; and William Hawley, Board Chair.

Additional attendees included Tom McKay, owner of Moab Express Transportation; Judd Hill, representing the airport's planning and engineering team; and Mark Marcum, Airport Operations Manager and ARFF Specialist.

Citizens to Be Heard

During the "Citizens to Be Heard" portion, several members of the public provided input regarding the airport's airline service.

Ben Gooch, a Moab resident, commended the county's online survey efforts and expressed support for SkyWest, emphasizing its ability to provide broader connectivity through single-ticket bookings and access to larger markets.

Former commissioner Rory Paxman criticized the survey methodology and voiced strong support for Contour Airlines, citing its reliability, community involvement, and willingness to serve multiple preferred destinations such as Phoenix, Denver, Las Vegas, and Salt Lake City, while also expressing concerns about SkyWest's past service history and commitment to the region.

Rachel Paxman also advocated for Contour, highlighting its responsiveness to community needs, broader interline agreements, projected growth in flights and passenger volume, and flexibility in destinations and scheduling. Overall, public comments reflected differing perspectives, with some prioritizing national connectivity and others emphasizing consistency, local engagement, and service reliability.

Reports

Project Report

The Board moved into project reports, with updates provided on several ongoing and upcoming airport projects. It was reported that the ramp expansion project is currently underway and represents a significant construction effort. During this work, there have been multiple instances of the water line being struck, resulting in temporary disruptions. As a precaution, "do not drink" notices have been posted at the airport. It was explained that although the affected water originates from a pressurized line and is later treated, the notices remain in place until proper testing confirms safety. The system includes a well located along the runway, which pumps water to a storage tank when levels drop, with treatment occurring after the point where the line has been damaged. As part of the project, the aging water line—approximately 41 years old—is being replaced. Installation of the new line is nearly complete, with final connections either finished or imminent, and coordination with state drinking water authorities will follow required documentation and testing procedures.

Additional discussion focused on apron conditions, particularly in the area commonly referred to as the "back 40" near the hangars. Crews are currently addressing wet soil conditions caused by long-term moisture accumulation beneath the asphalt surface. While underdrains are in place to manage water flow, elevated moisture content has created challenges for achieving proper compaction. At the same time, concerns were raised by aircraft owners regarding excessive dust, particularly during windy conditions. While water trucks are being used for dust control, it was acknowledged that balancing dust suppression with maintaining safe working conditions is difficult, as overwatering can create mud and reduce equipment stability. The project team agreed to continue monitoring and improving dust abatement efforts, including evaluating options for weekend mitigation despite limited resources.

An update was also provided on the ARFF (Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting) truck. Remaining decisions primarily involve finalizing trim color details and ensuring appropriate coordination with relevant personnel. The manufacturer is currently awaiting the airport logo before completing the exterior design, though this is not expected to impact overall production timing.

Finally, updates were given on upcoming projects, including pavement maintenance and the entrance road improvement project. Coordination efforts are ongoing, with some documentation still pending. It was noted that future apron expansion phases will be planned in alignment with the current ramp project to avoid operational conflicts, though no updated timeline for the next phase is currently available. Overall, the Board acknowledged the active status of three current projects and two upcoming efforts, with additional details to be provided as timelines are confirmed.

Airport Director and Board Members Reports

The meeting included a brief organizational update in addition to the ongoing Essential Air Service (EAS) work for Moab/Canyonlands Regional Airport. Staff reported progress on rebuilding the administrative team, noting that Mark Marcum has been hired and has joined the organization, and that a new administrative staff member is scheduled to begin on the 23rd.

General Business – Action Items – Discussion and Consideration of Approval

Recommendation to the Grand County Commission for EAS Provider

Introduction – Steven Gleason Airport Director

The meeting continued with Steve providing background on the airline selection process, explaining that the goal was to take a more proactive and structured approach compared to previous efforts. He noted that in the past, unexpected challenges—such as SkyWest withdrawing and a broader pilot shortage—created difficulties, and that Contour Airlines ultimately stepped in to support the community during that time. Building on those experiences, Steve emphasized the importance of establishing a clear evaluation process to consider multiple carriers rather than limiting options. To support this effort, L.B. Schmidt & Associates were engaged to assist with conducting thorough evaluations, resulting in four strong proposals now ready for review. He also highlighted the importance of incorporating community input, noting that feedback gathered from residents would be presented later by Melissa Jeffers. Following his remarks, Steve concluded by turning the time over to Luke to present his findings.

Presentation – LB. Schmidt & Associates, LLC

The meeting focused on the evaluation and development of Essential Air Service (EAS) proposals for Moab/Canyonlands Regional Airport (CNY), with the facilitator outlining the overall process, market analysis, and airline submissions intended for the next contract cycle. The goal of the effort was to secure at least three viable jet service proposals and to support the U.S. Department of Transportation in selecting a carrier that would best serve the region's long-term air service needs. The facilitator described his role in building a comprehensive market profile, engaging with airlines, coordinating site visits, and consolidating community and airline feedback for presentation to the DOT and the local decision-making body.

The market analysis identified a five-county catchment area in eastern and southeastern Utah with a population of approximately 58,000 residents. Despite its relatively small population base, the region demonstrates strong economic indicators, including substantial GDP, retail activity, and bank deposits, indicating meaningful travel demand and discretionary income. The airport competes primarily with Grand Junction, Colorado, as well as smaller regional airports such as Cortez, with geography playing a significant role in travel behavior. The analysis noted that many residents must pass near Canyonlands Airport en route to competing airports, particularly Grand Junction, which contributes to measurable passenger leakage.

A parking lot survey conducted at Grand Junction Airport suggested that approximately 8% of parked vehicles were registered in Utah, supporting the conclusion that a significant portion of potential local passengers are utilizing alternate airports. Depending on assumptions regarding occupancy per vehicle, the analysis estimated annual leakage ranging from roughly 22,000 to 44,000 passengers. The facilitator emphasized that these figures were conservative and likely understate true demand, particularly given seasonal travel fluctuations associated with tourism in the region.

Federal origin-destination data was also reviewed, showing that the top outbound markets from Moab included San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and Portland. The analysis highlighted that most passengers connect through major hubs, with Denver and Salt Lake City emerging as the most relevant connecting points, followed by Phoenix. Denver, in particular, was noted for its extensive network reach, with over 150 non-stop destinations, while Salt Lake City also provides broad connectivity, though with slightly fewer non-stop options.

A community survey conducted in partnership with the Moab Chamber of Commerce received 177 responses, representing a strong 59% response rate. Results indicated that both business and leisure travelers primarily take one to five round trips annually. The most significant factor influencing airport choice was access to legacy airline networks, followed by proximity, reliability, and, to a lesser extent, airfare. Grand Canyonlands Airport and Grand Junction were closely split as primary departure points among respondents, with Canyonlands slightly ahead for business travel. Preferred connecting hubs mirrored broader market patterns, with Salt Lake City and Denver dominating preferences.

The meeting then reviewed four airline proposals submitted for EAS service. Two proposals were from Part 121 carriers, SkyWest Airlines and Denver Air Connection, and two were from Part 135 carriers, Contour Airlines and Advanced Air. Key differences among the proposals included aircraft type (ranging from 30-seat jets to 50-seat regional aircraft), service frequency, hub selection, and level of integration with legacy airline systems. SkyWest offered a codeshare arrangement with Delta and United, providing full integration including ticketing and frequent flyer benefits, while the other carriers operated under interline agreements with varying levels of connectivity and passenger benefits.

The proposals included varying service structures, with some carriers emphasizing Denver and Salt Lake City connectivity, while others proposed service to Phoenix. Aircraft capabilities were also discussed, including performance considerations during high-temperature summer operations, particularly for smaller aircraft types that may face weight restrictions in hot and high-altitude conditions. Passenger projections varied by carrier, with estimates ranging from approximately 7,000 to nearly 28,000 annual enplanements depending on service configuration and aircraft size.

Additional discussion addressed differences between codeshare and interline ticketing, baggage handling, frequent flyer accrual, and booking flexibility. It was noted that codeshare arrangements generally provide a more seamless customer experience, while interline agreements offer functional connectivity but with fewer integrated benefits. Marketing contributions and willingness to support additional seasonal or “at-risk” flights were also compared across proposals, with each carrier offering varying levels of financial or operational support.

The presentation concluded with general consensus that all four proposals were viable and competitive, each with distinct strengths and tradeoffs. Key considerations for the final recommendation included the importance of seamless connectivity to major airline hubs, service reliability, aircraft capacity, and overall cost. Participants acknowledged that tourism plays a significant role in demand, though additional data collection may be needed to better understand the split between local and visitor passengers. The facilitator closed by emphasizing that the final decision should reflect the community’s priorities in balancing connectivity, frequency, reliability, and long-term sustainability of air service for the region.

Presentation – Melisa Jeffers, Economic Development for Grand County

Melisa Jeffers provided an overview of the methodology and findings from a multi-phase evaluation process conducted with support from economic opportunity advisory board funding used to hire consultant Luke Schmidt. She explained that the process included outreach to local businesses and residents, beginning with an open-ended survey sent to tourism-related businesses registered with the local tourism office. This initial survey received just over 30 responses and was designed to avoid bias by not prompting specific answers. According to the summarized results, respondents frequently raised concerns about reliability, connectivity, booking issues, and impacts to the local economy, with many expressing dissatisfactions related to the incumbent service and some showing support for alternative carriers. She noted that subsequent waves of survey responses, distributed more broadly including via social media, showed lower data quality, including duplicate and non-attributed entries, though these were still retained for transparency. A second, more structured resident-focused survey received approximately 80 responses and used an algorithmic scoring model to evaluate airline proposals based on weighted preferences such as affordability, safety standards, code-sharing availability, rebooking ease, and frequent flyer benefits. She explained the scoring methodology, including how ratings were distributed among competing airline proposals depending on which carriers offered specific features. Preliminary results from this model indicated a strong preference for SkyWest across responses. She also noted that an independent evaluation of all four proposals was conducted to supplement the survey data and ensure a comprehensive assessment for decision-making purposes.

Review Recommendation from Airport Development Subcommittee – Bill Winfield Grand County Commission

In the subcommittee meeting, three commissioners were present: Commissioner Bill Winfield, Commissioner McGann, and Commissioner McCandless. Also in attendance were Steve Gleason, Luke Schmidt, Melisa Jeffers with supporting data from the Economic Development Office, and Administrator Mark Tyner. During the meeting, commissioners expressed differing initial preferences regarding airline service options, with one supporting Contour, one supporting Denver Air, and one supporting a code share arrangement. The committee reviewed presentations, including information provided by Luke Schmidt and data presented by Melisa Jeffers, as well as extensive public comment submitted by citizens. Steve was asked to compile and distribute the public letters, which reflected strong overall support for a code share option. After discussion and consideration of the data and public input, the subcommittee reached a unanimous 3–0 decision in favor of pursuing a SkyWest code share arrangement.

Airport Board Discussion and Recommendation

The Board entered into discussion regarding the EAS carrier selection process, beginning with a review of potential conflicts of interest. The Chair asked members to consider whether any financial or professional relationships warranted recusal. Legal counsel clarified the distinction between restricted conflicts, which require mandatory recusal due to direct financial benefit, and situations that call for disclosure but not necessarily recusal. Members were encouraged to err on the side of over-disclosure. One member formally recused themselves due to current employment with one of the proposing airlines, while several others disclosed professional or business relationships with airport-related services, including rental cars, outfitting, tourism, and shuttle operations.

The Chair then introduced a straw poll process to gather initial opinions from Board members before taking a formal vote. Members were asked to share both positive and negative perspectives on the proposals. During discussion, several key factors were consistently highlighted, including enplanement trends, operational reliability, fleet capabilities, connectivity through codeshare agreements, and alignment with major airline networks. Multiple members emphasized the importance of partnerships with larger carriers, noting benefits such as streamlined travel, improved scheduling, and access to broader domestic and international markets. Community feedback, particularly from surrounding areas, was also cited as an important consideration, with some noting a preference among travelers for certain carriers and destinations.

Additional considerations included the economic impact of service reliability on local businesses, tourism, and passenger convenience, as well as access to key destinations such as major hubs and regional services. The importance of strong contractual terms was also discussed, including performance metrics and accountability measures to ensure consistent service and avoid past challenges. Workforce considerations, including wages reflective of the local cost of living, were also noted.

Following discussion, a motion was made by Randy Martin, Board Member and seconded by AJ Throgmorton, Board Member to recommend a specific carrier Sky West and route structure to the County Commission as part of the EAS contract process. The Board then conducted a formal vote. The motion passed with all voting members in favor, no opposition, and one abstention due to a declared conflict of interest. The recommendation will be forwarded to the County Commission for consideration as part of the official process.

Future Considerations

The Board discussed future agenda planning in anticipation of administrative support returning on March 23. Members agreed to begin revisiting and reviving previously tabled items that had been put on hold, and invited additional suggestions for future agendas. It was noted that outstanding meeting minutes have not yet been approved due to limited administrative capacity, and while the Board hopes to address and approve those minutes at the next meeting, progress may be gradual to allow the new administrator time to get up to speed.

The Board confirmed that the next regular meeting will be held on the first Monday of the upcoming month, returning to the established schedule following recent adjustments related to EAS matters. Members agreed to proceed with that date and to include revived and new future agenda items for discussion at that time.

Discussion then turned to the Essential Air Service (EAS) contract process. It was clarified that the Board's recommendation will be forwarded to the County Commission for consideration, after which it will be submitted to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). While the DOT makes the final award decision, it was noted that the Department gives significant weight to the community's recommendation, particularly when bid costs are comparable. The Board also reviewed the current timeline, noting that the public comment period on proposals began following their posting in late February and is currently ongoing. After the close of the comment period, the DOT will conduct its due diligence process, which typically takes 30 to 60 days, although some delays have occurred.

Based on the anticipated schedule, the Board discussed that a final decision could reasonably be expected by late May or early June. Following the award, there will be a transition period of approximately three to four months to implement the new contract. The current EAS contract held by Contour Airlines is set to expire on September 30, with the expectation that the new contract will take effect on October 1. It was further noted that continuity of air service is expected to be maintained without interruption, as the current carrier is obligated to operate through the end of its contract, and provisions exist for extensions if necessary to ensure a seamless transition.

Adjournment: 5:53 p.m.