

FAQs

What is the effect of Coronavirus; does it eliminate the need for expansion?

As of early November 2020, the airport passenger traffic had recovered from the single digits in April to approximately 35 percent of prior year levels. It is normal for aviation demand and economy to see sudden dips, as well as periods of above-average growth. When viewed over decades, aviation has grown steadily and predictably.

There is no reason to believe that near-term swings in passenger numbers will invalidate our 20-year planning forecast. For more information, we invite you to read the Strategic Development Plan chapter entitled **Aviation Demand Forecast**, which contains historical information back to 1968.

The forecast serves the purposes of our ongoing long-term planning efforts; we will not seek to construct any projects until justified by actual demand. Lastly, we will also update the long-term plans for SAT every five to nine years, which will include a new forecast.

How is SAT evaluating noise before anything is built or a major runway is closed?

Noise will be considered in four ways during the SDP:

1. The Strategic Development Plan team will develop a comparison of the 20-year noise footprints between different renditions of the preliminary preferred airfield alternative.
2. We have started the process of updating the Noise Exposure Map (NEM), which will update the existing noise contour and produce a future (5-year) contour. These maps are the basis of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) noise mitigation program, which in the past funded our acoustical treatment program. The technical team will use the new FAA AEDT (Aviation Environmental Design Tool) noise modeling software, which is more accurate than prior models. Two sets of four public meetings will be held to engage community members in the process.
3. Before starting construction projects, airports must produce supporting documentation and obtain environmental approvals under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), such as an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. Changes in noise contours caused by the projects for which we will seek approval will be identified. Areas newly affected by a proposed project will likely be eligible for FAA-funded noise mitigation (which could include acquisition, acoustical treatment, and easements). It is important to note that we will implement most projects in increments, each of which will require approval before construction. For example, we do not expect to need a full runway extension to a length of up to 10,000 feet or more until approximately 20 years from now. In the nearer term, we are more likely to require a shorter extension, such as a 500- or 1,000-foot extension to the existing 8,500-foot runway. Once we construct and mitigate for an approved shorter runway extension, any subsequent further extensions would require a new environmental approval under NEPA requirements, including noise assessment.

4. We will update our Noise Exposure Map again in about five years.

I understand there are impacts to Randolph and other Joint Base San Antonio missions; how are they part of the Strategic Development Plan?

Currently, there are manageable airspace conflicts with both Randolph Air Force Base (AFB) and Lackland AFB/Kelly Airfield when using Runway 4-22. Therefore, the FAA Air Traffic Control Tower at SAT is in continuous communication with the Air Traffic Control Towers at Randolph AFB and Lackland AFB/Kelly Airfield to manage the existing air traffic interdependence. Increased future dependence on Runway 4-22 (*caused by more operations on Runway 4-22 or by building a parallel runway to it*) would be unacceptable because it would increase the interference with aircraft operations at multiple Joint Base San Antonio (JBSA) locations.

The San Antonio Airport System is fully committed to supporting the mission of all JBSA operations. Representatives of JBSA serve on the Strategic Development Plan Technical Advisory Committee, Transportation and Planning Partners Working Group, and the Stakeholder Working Group.

How many Strategic Development Plan advisory group meetings have been held?

There are three advisory committees, including the Technical Advisory Committee, which is comprised of people representing organizations that are involved in aviation, such as the FAA, airlines, Joint Base San Antonio, and airport tenants; the Transportation and Planning Partners Working Group, which has members from organizations responsible for transportation and urban planning in the region, such as VIA and TxDOT; and the Stakeholder Working Group, which consists of members representing neighborhood alliances and others with a vested interest in the airport, such as business and tourism organizations.

Three meetings have been held so far with each committee; two occurred during Phase 1 of the Strategic Development Plan in 2018, and one has taken place so far in Phase 2. Additionally, the Technical Advisory Committee participated in the development of airfield alternatives in late 2019 (together with the Council-appointed Airport Advisory Commission), for a total of four Technical Advisory Committee meetings so far.

When will Runway 4-22 be downsized or closed, and no longer be an option for air carriers?

Crosswind Runway 4-22 will in the long term be closed once it exceeds its useful pavement life. The FAA will not fund its future reconstruction because Runway 4-22 is no longer needed as a crosswind runway per FAA wind coverage requirements. This is a national FAA policy that affects many US airports. We first shared this information with the public in Phase 1 of the Strategic Development Plan in 2018 with the advisory committees, with community members at four open houses, at meetings with the City Council Transportation Committee, and with the City Council at a B Session.

The proposed closure of Runway 4-22 is not anticipated to occur until between 2040 to 2050. This runway also provides SAT with a backup air carrier runway until a parallel runway is built, and we will keep Runway 4-22 open and in use as long as possible.

Why not extend Runway 4-22 or build a parallel runway to it?

While the use of Runway 4 has grown over the last several years, the SDP technical alternatives evaluation found that there are several limitations to further increasing its use, including:

1. airspace conflicts with Randolph AFB arrivals and departures;
2. the intersection with Runway 13R-31L which as been deemed a safety “hot spot” by the FAA;
3. and to a lesser extent, Lackland AFB/Kelly Airfield interference with Runway 4 arrivals.

In other words, making Runway 4-22 SAT’s main runway would increase the current airspace conflicts. It would make the SAT operation mostly dependent on the Joint Base San Antonio aircraft operations at Randolph AFB and Lackland AFB/Kelly Airfield. This is not acceptable, given SAT’s role as a growing air carrier airport and important contribution to the regional economy.

Also, because Runway 4-22 will ultimately go away as an air carrier runway (*some time after a parallel runway is built, between 2040 and 2050*), investing in extending it versus extending one of the 13-31 runways would not be a sound infrastructure investment. As such, it is likely to be ineligible for FAA funding. It should also be noted that there is not sufficient space off the ends of Runway 4-22 for a substantial extension to benefit air carrier aircraft. To the south, limitations include the space needed for a runway safety area (overrun) and airspace clearance over the elevated portion of Loop 410.

Limitations to the north include the Salado Creek and Mud Creek floodplain and wetlands areas, as well as the Salado Creek Greenway. So-called special purpose environmental laws mandate that impacts to these areas are only allowable if no alternative exists that avoids such impacts. In our case, the final SDP alternatives avoid special purpose environmental impacts.

Lastly, once a closely spaced parallel runway will have been built, SAT’s airfield will be an efficient two-runway parallel traffic flow in the 13-31 direction. Like other US parallel-runway airfields with good wind coverage, Runway 4-22 could not be used much anymore at that time, because its traffic would cross with two parallel traffic flows on the 13-31 runways.

For these reasons, the technical alternatives evaluation process eliminated alternatives that would extend Runway 4-22, build a parallel to it, or build other air carrier runways in the general northeast-southwest orientation.

Would the SAT airfield expansion be a financial burden on the City of San Antonio or the taxpayers?

No. Airfield projects are mostly funded from the Airport Improvement Program (AIP) fund administered by the FAA. As with highway improvements that are funded through fuel taxes and other vehicle-related fees, AIP funds come from passenger ticket taxes and aircraft fuel taxes, meaning that airfield projects are funded by users of the aviation system. They are NOT funded by local, county or state taxes paid by residents.

Additional funding for airport improvements comes from other airline- or passenger-based fees, such as the passenger facility charge, fuel flowage fees, aircraft landing fees, airport rents, and airport revenue bonds. However, the City may choose to fund portions of the development cost.

I have heard that airlines are willing to start flights to Europe from SAT. Is this true?

While air carriers periodically show interest in serving Europe from San Antonio, there currently is no such route from SAT. Certain aircraft can already reach western European cities from our existing runways, so a runway extension is not necessary today. However, based on our projected passenger and economic growth, we expect demand for European or farther destinations to happen within the Strategic Development Plan's 20-year planning period. Should an airline commit to offering such service, the airport, as part of the City of San Antonio's transportation infrastructure, needs to be able to accommodate it. This means that we must plan for it now. Common international aircraft, such as the Boeing 787, that fly to farther European, South American, or even Asian destinations, would require a runway extension. Up to a total length of 10,700 feet could be needed and we are examining whether and how that could be accommodated.

When will you start construction?

Construction of major projects resulting from the Strategic Development Plan will commence years from now. After the plan is adopted by the City of San Antonio and approved by the FAA, environmental and financial approvals will be needed before engineering design can start, followed by construction of the first projects. Toward the end of the plan, we will determine the sequence of incremental projects over time and the associated required approvals. For example, the first projects could be terminal expansion, taxiway improvements, a small runway extension, or initial roadway improvements. The need for a longer extension is estimated to be 20 years away. In the interim, smaller projects will include new gates and new concessions in Terminals A and B.

Will you be acquiring land to increase the length of the runway, and if so, when?

Land acquisition is required not for any extensions of the runway itself but may be for the edges of the protective surfaces beyond the end of the extended runways (*most of which the City already owns*). Because improvements in the next 20 years will be made on an incremental basis (*for example, taxiway improvements and incremental runway extensions*), it will be up to 20 years before we would require additional land. In the meantime, if property near the ends of the main runway or around the airport perimeter becomes available for sale, we hope to be able to buy and hold it for future aeronautical use.

Why are you not looking at building a new airport?

We looked at and answered that question in Phase 1 of the Strategic Development Plan (SDP). The airport can be made to fit in its current location for the next 50 years. A new airport is therefore not required, will not be eligible for FAA funding, could not obtain environmental approvals, and therefore could not be built. In Phase 1, a White Paper was developed on this topic. (Please see "New Airport Implementation Process Overview" at www.sanantonio.gov/SATfuture.)

This paper generally describes the process, associated timeline, order of magnitude cost, and what a typical new airport would most likely look like. The high-growth scenario of the San Antonio International Airport's SDP 20-year forecast, which was reviewed and accepted by the FAA, was extrapolated to 2068 to define the needs that a new airport would have to accommodate. This forecast and the decision that no new airport is needed were also reviewed and accepted by the Mayor-appointed Airport

System Development Committee, the three Strategic Development Plan advisory groups, the Airport Advisory Commission, and the San Antonio City Council.

Are there environmental approvals that are needed before the airport can expand?

Yes, in two ways: (1) The airport is subject to various permits from past projects and that are required by the City, State and federal government; and (2) Prior to implementing any new projects, the airport carefully follows the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. NEPA is a law about procedure (process) and requires agencies to take a hard look at environmental impacts. The purpose of NEPA is public disclosure of impacts, and to ensure that federal decision-makers have sought public input and the input of public agencies with special environmental expertise, and that they understand the environmental consequences of their decisions. Adherence to the NEPA process is required for full unconditional approval and thus implementation of projects on an ALP (Airport Layout Plan). This means that projects from the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) will mostly require NEPA approvals prior to moving ahead.

When will Terminal C be built?

Any new terminal facilities will be determined through the Strategic Development Plan (SDP). Terminal C was previously proposed at the time the economy and airline flights collapsed, and the project was abandoned in 2008. The SDP is looking at all needed airport projects and will come up with a new path toward future facilities.

What is the difference between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Strategic Development Plan process?

Phase 1 determined that the existing San Antonio International Airport can accommodate the region's long-term aviation needs and could be made to fit at the current location.

Phase 2 will plan to accommodate demand for a 20-year period and will produce a preferred airport development plan for the airfield, terminal, and airport access. Phase 2 will also preserve airspace and land use flexibility for the next 50 years.

What is a “noise contour”? Could aircraft noise be reduced due to new aircraft technology?

A “noise contour” is the “map” of noise exposure around an airport. A contour is computed through a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) model which calculates annual noise exposure. The FAA is phasing out older, noisier commercial aircraft, resulting in some stages of aircraft no longer being in the fleet. Aircraft noise is regulated through standards.

Does the strong growth mean that the forecast from 2018 is outdated?

During Phase 2 of the SDP, the forecast information assembled during Phase 1 will be reviewed and updated if necessary.

The impact of the COVID-19 virus is such that we'll be taking another look at the 2040 forecast once we have a better handle on its longer-term impact on the economy and the aviation industry.

I thought the plans for the airport were already decided in Phase 1. Why are you doing a Phase 2?

Phase 1 determined that the existing San Antonio International Airport could be made to fit at the current location.

Phase 2 will plan how to accommodate demand for a 20-year period and will produce a preferred airport development plan for the airfield, terminal, and airport access.

What is the difference between the “Strategic Development Plan” and a “master plan”?

“Master plan” represents a typical FAA-guided process for a 20-year timeframe.

“Strategic Development Plan” refers to our two-phase process that plans for the region’s 20-year aviation needs at SAT, a general 50-year possibility to prevent conflicts that could limit future flexibility in the current location beyond 20 years, and the six-year short range Capital Improvements Plan that identifies capital projects, financing options, and timetable.

Why are you doing community outreach throughout the city, instead of just around the airport?

The Strategic Development Plan relates to the entire city, and not just the homes and buildings near the airport. San Antonio International Airport is owned by the City of San Antonio, and community members and their visitors from all over the city and region use it. The goal is to inform and engage everyone who wants to learn about and provide input to the SDP.

Why do we say “SAAS” and “SAT”?

“SAAS” refers to “San Antonio Airport System”, which includes both the San Antonio International Airport (SAT) and Stinson Municipal Airport (SSF).

“SAT” and “SSF” are the three-letter airport codes abbreviations that were originally created for the convenience of pilots, and now are seen on passengers’ boarding passes and baggage tags.