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Airport Master Plan

Planning, Safety and a Forward-Looking Vision
for Island Airports

By L. Pérez Pérez Eng.MSc.

President, Pérez Engineering Consulting Services Ltd.

*More
connected
islands,
stronger
communities*

PLANNING
WITH A TERRITORIAL
VISION



UNIQUE SETTINGS
REAL SOLUTIONS

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AERODROME

SAFE OPERATIONS
IN ISLAND ENVIRONMENTS

INFRASTRUCTURE
THAT CONNECTS
OPPORTUNITIES



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Safety**

Design and operation
for a safer future



**Capacity and
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Efficient solutions
for sustainable growth



**Climate
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Airports prepared
for greater challenges



**Aerodrome
Certification**

Compliance, quality
and operational excellence

Institutional note

This article is part of the technical publication series of Perez Engineering Consulting Services Ltd. on airport planning, aerodrome infrastructure, operational safety and aerodrome certification in Small Island States.

The series contributes to the technical analysis of essential issues for the development, modernization and safe management of regional and island airports, with special attention to the physical, institutional, environmental and economic conditions that characterize the Caribbean.

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PART I

Foundations of the Airport Master Plan

The first part presents the conceptual and institutional foundations of airport master planning. It explains why master planning should not be understood as an administrative formality, but as a strategic instrument for organizing growth, protecting the future of the airport and supporting sound decision-making.

1. Introduction

The development of an airport should not be the result of isolated decisions, urgent works or partial solutions accumulated over time. An airport is a strategic infrastructure that connects territories, supports economies, facilitates tourism, enables essential services, contributes to emergency response and projects the capacity of a country or region to integrate with the world.

For that reason, airport growth cannot depend only on immediate needs or circumstantial pressures. It must respond to a technical, institutional and economic vision capable of organizing the present and protecting the future. That vision is expressed, in practical terms, through the Airport Master Plan.

An Airport Master Plan is not a decorative document or an administrative formality. It is the roadmap that allows decision-makers to understand where an airport should go, which investments are priorities, which areas must be protected, which risks must be corrected, which capabilities must be developed and which decisions could compromise future growth if they are not anticipated in time.

In small, regional or island airports, this need becomes even more important. Physical constraints, coastal location, mountainous terrain, urban pressure, limited available land, environmental sensitivity and constrained public finances require more planning, not less. Where there is little space and limited capacity to correct costly mistakes, master planning becomes an essential tool for safety, efficiency and sustainability.

KEY IDEA

An Airport Master Plan is not a list of works. It is a strategy for deciding what to build, when to build it, where to locate it and how to protect the airport's future.

It is often assumed that only large international airports require a Master Plan. That assumption is technically flawed. Small airports, precisely because of their restrictions and vulnerabilities, require a structured vision that enables phased development, prioritizes investments, prevents functional conflicts, protects operational areas, anticipates demand and prepares the way for higher levels of compliance.

An airport is not only a runway. It is an integrated system where the airside, landside, technical installations, aeronautical services, environment and surrounding territory interact. The airside includes the aerodrome itself and its essential operational components, such as runways, taxiways, aprons, strips, safety areas, visual aids, pavements, drainage and areas dedicated to aircraft movement and parking.

The landside includes the passenger terminal, access roads, internal roadways, parking, cargo facilities, hangars, FBO facilities, administrative buildings, support services and the areas where passengers, cargo, vehicles and air transport interface. Between both sides, there is also a set of technical facilities that are essential for safe airport operation, including the control tower, Rescue and Fire Fighting Services, fuel areas, electrical systems, communications, aeronautical meteorology, navigation aids and other operational support components.

When any of these elements develops in isolation, the airport can lose functional coherence, increase future costs and create constraints that are difficult to correct. The Airport Master Plan must therefore understand the airport as a complete system where infrastructure, operations, services, environment, land use and future growth are analyzed in a coordinated manner.

The primary value of the Master Plan is to organize decisions before works become irreversible. It does not require everything to be built immediately, and it should not impose impossible solutions on constrained airports. Rather, it helps identify what can be done in the short, medium and long term; which areas must be reserved; which investments should be prioritized; which risks must be reduced; and which technical, operational, environmental or institutional measures should guide safe and coherent development.

From an operational safety perspective, the Master Plan performs a fundamental function. It helps identify existing conditions that may affect safe aerodrome operation, including deteriorated pavements, insufficient apron areas, aircraft parked in inappropriate positions, interference between activities, obstacles, drainage deficiencies, limited safety areas or lack of space for future improvements.

Operational safety does not depend only on physical infrastructure. It also requires the identification, documentation and management of airport-related risks such as wildlife hazards, runway incursions, obstacles, operational interference, emergency response, waste management, aircraft noise, environmental effects and other events that may compromise the regularity and safety of operations.

A well-conceived Airport Master Plan does not replace the operational, environmental or safety plans that an airport must maintain. It does, however, help integrate them within a common development vision. Its purpose is not to identify deficiencies in order to stop growth, but to recognize them, prioritize them and create the conditions to correct them in an organized and progressive way.

In small island States, this vision is especially relevant. Many Caribbean airports have grown under difficult conditions, responding to real needs for connectivity, tourism and economic development, while not always having the resources to immediately meet all ideal design parameters. In that context, the Airport Master Plan should not be seen as a barrier, but as an instrument that allows development to move forward with realism, safety and financial justification.

This article explains the importance of the Airport Master Plan as a strategic instrument for airport development, with special attention to small, regional and island aerodromes. It highlights its relationship with operational safety, phased development, land-use protection, coordination with civil aviation authorities and the future preparation of airports for more demanding compliance and certification processes.

An airport that aspires to modernize needs more than works. It needs direction. The Airport Master Plan is precisely that direction.

2. Origin, institutional basis and scope of the Airport Master Plan

Airport master planning did not emerge as a bureaucratic requirement or as a documentary procedure intended to delay airport development. Its origin responds to a practical need: to organize the growth of increasingly complex facilities, anticipate future demand, protect essential areas, coordinate investments and ensure that the physical development of airports remains aligned with operational safety, system capacity and State responsibilities.

As air transport grew in volume, complexity and diversity of aircraft, airports evolved from simple landing fields into critical infrastructure for transport, commerce, tourism, territorial connectivity and national security. This growth required States, airport operators and civil aviation authorities to rely on planning instruments capable of looking beyond the immediate project.

At the international level, the International Civil Aviation Organization has developed technical documents that provide guidance for the planning, design, operation, environmental management, land-use protection and certification of aerodromes. Among them, the Airport Planning Manual, Doc 9184, Part 1 - Master Planning occupies a special place. It provides a fundamental reference for understanding the airport as an integrated system and for structuring decisions related to airside development, landside development, support facilities and the future evolution of airport infrastructure.

The Federal Aviation Administration of the United States has also produced highly valuable technical guidance, including Advisory Circular AC 150/5070-6B, Airport Master Plans. This guidance supports the preparation of airport master plans for airports of different sizes and functions, from general aviation airports to larger commercial service facilities. Its importance lies in translating airport planning into an orderly, documented and verifiable process where demand, capacity, physical development, environment, land use and investment priorities are analyzed together.

PLANNING PRINCIPLE

The Airport Master Plan does not replace the civil aviation authority and does not certify an aerodrome by itself. Its value lies in organizing information, decisions and investments so the airport can evolve with technical and institutional coherence.

The Airport Master Plan should therefore not be viewed as an isolated document. It is part of a technical planning culture promoted by international organizations, aeronautical authorities and specialized entities that recognize that an airport cannot grow properly if every decision is taken independently.

It is important, however, to define its scope. An Airport Master Plan is not, by itself, an aerodrome certificate. It is not an automatic authorization to operate specific aircraft, and it does not replace the decisions of the competent civil aviation authority. It does not replace the procedures for approval, oversight, certification, aeronautical data publication or operational authorization established by the legislation of each State.

The official status of a Master Plan depends on the institutional and legal framework under which it is prepared, reviewed, approved or adopted. In some cases, it may be formally approved by an airport authority, ministry, public administration, regulatory body, airport operator or land-use planning authority. In others, it may begin as a technical reference document that guides investments and future decisions until institutional validation is completed.

Even though it does not replace certification or operational authorization, the Airport Master Plan has high technical and institutional value. It organizes information, documents needs, justifies investments, protects land, forecasts demand, structures implementation phases, identifies risks, establishes priorities and creates a coherent basis for future airport development.

From the perspective of the civil aviation authority, the Master Plan should not be interpreted as an intrusion into regulatory responsibilities, but as a tool that facilitates them. An aviation authority needs reliable information, clear development scenarios, consistent infrastructure data, safety analysis, obstacle identification, protection of operational areas, land-use management and evidence that the operator or State has an organized vision for the aerodrome's future.

Airport master planning should therefore be understood as a bridge between the airport's present reality and its future development. It is not a constraint and not a decorative document. It is a technical guide to improve decisions, a coordination tool, a support for public and private investment and a reference that enables airports to grow with order, responsibility and long-term vision.

In short, the Airport Master Plan does not limit development. It makes responsible development possible.

3. What is an Airport Master Plan?

An Airport Master Plan is a technical instrument for strategic planning that defines how an airport should develop over time. Its purpose is not to design every work in construction detail, but to establish an orderly vision for future growth by identifying needs, alternatives, priorities, implementation phases and areas that must be protected to avoid compromising later development.

Unlike a construction design, the Master Plan does not yet provide the level of detail required to build a runway, terminal, apron or technical facility. Its function is broader and earlier: to determine what should be done, why it should be done, where it should be located, when it should be executed and how it should fit within the overall airport system.

It should not be confused with a simple layout plan. A drawing can show a physical arrangement, but a Master Plan must explain the technical, operational, economic, environmental and territorial reasons that justify that arrangement. The drawing is a representation; the Master Plan is the analytical process that gives it meaning.

Nor is a Master Plan merely a feasibility study. A feasibility study may evaluate whether a specific project or alternative is viable. The Master Plan organizes a set of interrelated decisions and establishes a development route for the whole airport, considering demand scenarios, capacity, constraints, risks and investments.

TECHNICAL NOTE

The Airport Master Plan is not a general drawing, not an isolated feasibility study and not a construction design. It is the instrument that orders those levels within a broader airport development strategy.

A Master Plan normally begins with a diagnosis of the existing situation. That diagnosis should review the available infrastructure, operational condition of the aerodrome, airside and landside characteristics, pavement condition, declared distances, apron capacity, terminal facilities, access roads, technical services, visual aids, support systems, physical limitations, obstacles, environmental setting and surrounding land use.

On the basis of that diagnosis, demand forecasts are prepared. These forecasts are not limited to passenger estimates. They may also consider cargo, general aviation, executive aviation, regional operations, charter flights, tourism services, emergency operations, institutional needs and possible changes in the fleet that currently uses or could use the airport.

The next step is to compare expected demand with existing capacity. This comparison identifies deficits, bottlenecks, risks, saturated areas or facilities that may become insufficient in the future. Runway, apron, taxiways, terminal, access, parking, cargo areas, emergency services, technical facilities and available expansion areas must be considered.

After the Master Plan, each work must proceed to specific studies and engineering designs. Runway extensions, pavement rehabilitation, new apron areas, terminals, drainage systems, fuel installations, control towers, navigation aids or airport electrical systems require their own engineering design, detailed budgets, permits, approvals and construction processes.

The Master Plan therefore answers primarily the questions of what, why, where, when and in what sequence. Engineering designs later answer how each component will be built.

In summary, an Airport Master Plan is the tool that converts a need for growth into an orderly development strategy. Its purpose is not to fill archives or produce attractive drawings, but to help decision-makers invest better, coordinate better and protect the future of the airport.

PART II

The airport as a strategic system

This part develops a central idea: an airport cannot be analyzed as a sum of independent works. Its performance depends on the relationship between the airside, landside, technical services, territorial context and future development needs.

4. The airport as a system: airside, landside and territorial context

An airport cannot be properly understood as a sum of independent works. Its operation depends on the coordinated relationship between operational areas, buildings, access roads, technical services, support facilities, aeronautical systems and surrounding territory. One of the most important contributions of the Airport Master Plan is to study the airport as an integrated system.

The most general classification distinguishes between airside and landside. The airside corresponds to the aerodrome and includes the areas directly used for aircraft movement, operation, safety and parking. It includes the runway, taxiways, aprons, strips, safety areas, visual aids, pavements, drainage systems, markings, aeronautical lighting and protected surfaces required for safe operations.

Airport as an Integrated System

Airport master planning connects infrastructure, operations, territory and future development.



Figure. The airport must be planned as one coordinated operational, territorial and institutional system.

The landside includes facilities and areas for passenger processing, cargo, vehicles, commercial services, ground access and support activities. It includes the passenger terminal, internal roads, parking areas, cargo facilities, hangars, FBO facilities, administrative buildings, maintenance areas and spaces where ground transport and air transport interface.

Between these two areas lies a more complex functional zone made up of technical and service installations essential for operational continuity. The control tower, Rescue and Fire Fighting Services, fuel installations, ramp support areas, electrical systems, standby power, waste management, maintenance facilities, meteorological systems and communications infrastructure are part of the technical network that sustains airport operations.

SYSTEM VISION

An airport is not only a runway and not only a passenger terminal. It is a system where airside, landside, technical services, territorial context and operational safety must work together.

Air navigation and aeronautical support systems are essential within this system. Radio navigation aids, approach systems, communications, surveillance, aeronautical meteorology and visual aids are not accessory elements. They are part of the support required for safety, regularity and efficiency. Depending on the category, complexity and needs of the aerodrome, they may include VOR/DME, ILS, NDB, automated weather information systems, air-ground communications, operational links, associated power systems and other CNS/ATM components.

The planning of these facilities must not be done in isolation. A navigation aid located without sufficient safeguarding, a control tower with limited visibility, a fuel area in an inconvenient location, an apron without safe maneuvering space or a terminal without room for future growth can become major development constraints.

The territorial context is also part of the airport system. An airport does not end at its perimeter fence. Its safety, capacity and growth depend on surrounding land uses, urban development, natural or artificial obstacles, road access, drainage, coastal areas, environmentally sensitive zones, aeronautical easements, wildlife attractants, industrial activities, hazardous facilities and land reserved for future expansion.

The Airport Master Plan therefore performs an articulating role. It does not replace engineering designs, but establishes the logic that should guide their location, priority, compatibility and sequence. It ensures that runway improvements do not contradict future apron development, terminal location does not block access growth, technical installations do not invade operational areas and land-use decisions preserve protected surfaces.

Operational safety, capacity and economic efficiency all improve when the airport is analyzed as a system. Integrated planning reduces interference, lowers future costs, organizes investments, facilitates approvals, improves the user experience, protects critical areas and provides greater clarity to authorities, operators, investors and the community.

5. Why small airports also need an Airport Master Plan

There is a false perception that Airport Master Plans are instruments reserved for large international airports with extensive land, high passenger volumes and complex infrastructure networks. In practice, the opposite is often true: the more limited an airport is in resources, physical space or ability to correct mistakes later, the more important master planning becomes.

Small, regional and island airports often operate under demanding conditions. They may be surrounded by the sea, urban areas, topography or environmentally sensitive zones. They may have limited runway strips, constrained apron capacity, modest terminal facilities, insufficient access, little room to relocate installations and restricted public budgets. This reality does not reduce the need for planning; it makes it urgent.

A large airport may sometimes absorb imperfect decisions because it has more land, more financing and greater institutional capacity. A small airport rarely has that margin. A poorly located facility, an uncontrolled land-use intrusion, an improvised expansion or a project executed without an overall vision can compromise development for years.

The Airport Master Plan therefore performs a protective function. It protects land, decisions, investments and opportunities. It anticipates which areas must be reserved, which areas should not be occupied, which improvements are immediate priorities and which future aspirations must remain open even if they cannot be implemented in the short term.

MESSAGE FOR SMALL ISLAND STATES

The physical scale of an airport does not reduce the importance of planning. In many cases, the smaller and more constrained the airport, the greater the rigor required to protect its future development.

This function is especially important in small island States, where the airport often represents more than a transport facility. It may be critical for international connectivity, tourism, medical access, emergency response, supply chains, business activity and the country's relationship with the region.

The physical scale of the airport should not be confused with the magnitude of its responsibility. A small airport can have national importance. It cannot evolve by accumulating partial solutions; it needs direction, priorities and a development sequence that considers both present constraints and future opportunities.

In many cases, it is not realistic to solve all accumulated needs in one stage. The Master Plan does not operate as a list of impossible requirements, but as an instrument for organizing improvement gradually. It helps determine what must be solved first, what can be programmed later and what must be preserved so future development remains possible.

In summary, small airports do not need less planning than large airports. In many cases, they need more. Their limited scale, physical constraints, economic vulnerability and territorial importance make the Airport Master Plan an indispensable tool for orderly growth, operational safety and a realistic vision of the future.

6. Planning does not mean building everything immediately

One of the most frequent errors in interpreting an Airport Master Plan is to assume that everything it contains must be built immediately. This interpretation may create institutional resistance, financial concern or political rejection, especially in small airports where resources are limited and needs compete with many other national priorities.

The Master Plan should not be understood as an order for simultaneous construction, but as an orderly route for development. It establishes a complete vision of the airport's future, organized into stages, priorities and time horizons. Planning does not mean building everything today; it means knowing what should come first, what can wait, what must be protected and which present decisions should not block future solutions.

Phased Development of the Airport Master Plan

From immediate safety needs to a long-term development vision.



Figure. A Master Plan converts development objectives into practical phases without closing future options.

In practice, a well-structured Master Plan distinguishes between immediate interventions, short-term improvements, medium-term developments and long-term strategic reserves. This sequence allows the airport to progress gradually according to financial capacity, operational needs and institutional conditions.

Immediate interventions are often related to operational safety, basic compliance, service continuity and correction of critical deficiencies. They may include pavement rehabilitation, drainage improvements, markings, lighting, obstacle control, aircraft parking reorganization, protection of operational areas, emergency services or correction of interference affecting daily operations.

KEY IDEA

Planning does not mean building everything immediately. It means avoiding decisions today that block solutions tomorrow.

Short-term actions may aim to improve basic efficiency and capacity: aprons, terminal adjustments, access roads, internal roadways, technical facilities, fuel areas, electrical systems, visual aids or operational improvements that allow a safer and more orderly service without requiring major transformations.

Medium-term development can address wider projects such as apron expansion, new taxiways, terminal expansion, relocation of installations, strengthening of CNS/ATM services, environmental improvements, resilient energy systems, cargo areas, hangars, FBO facilities or new economic activities related to the airport.

The long term does not always mean immediate construction. Often it means protecting possibilities: reserving land, avoiding incompatible occupation, preserving protected surfaces, identifying access corridors, and safeguarding areas for future technical installations.

Planning by stages also supports financial management. A small airport can rarely address all needs in one budget cycle, but it can build an organized project portfolio, justify priorities, prepare technical files, seek progressive financing and present a coherent strategy to authorities or investors.

The Master Plan helps avoid two equally harmful extremes: improvisation, in which isolated works respond only to immediate pressure, and paralysis, in which no improvements are made because the full long-term vision cannot be financed at once. Master planning offers a practical middle path: moving forward in phases, with realism, without losing direction.

Planning does not mean stopping development. It means giving development direction, safety and continuity.

Safety, capacity and infrastructure

This part examines how the Airport Master Plan organizes the technical factors that condition airport development: operational safety, protection of future options, demand, aircraft, capacity and infrastructure priorities.

7. Operational safety as the foundation of the Master Plan

Operational safety must be the foundation of every Airport Master Plan. No vision of growth, modernization or expansion can be considered technically valid if it does not begin with a serious evaluation of the conditions required to operate the airport safely, regularly and under control.

A Master Plan must not be limited to identifying new works or future development areas. Before proposing expansion, it must understand how the airport operates today, what its limitations are, which risks exist, which installations require correction and which decisions could improve or degrade operational safety.

In many small airports, safety limitations do not always appear as large visible failures. Sometimes they appear as an accumulation of conditions that may seem manageable individually but together reduce safety margins. Deteriorated pavements, insufficient drainage, limited aprons, poorly defined aircraft parking positions, interference between aircraft and vehicles, improvised fuel areas and lack of adequate parking for ground support equipment can become critical factors when not managed within an integrated vision.

Aerodrome conditions must also be considered: runway strips, RESA where applicable, obstacle limitation surfaces, slopes, markings, lighting, visual aids, perimeter fences, emergency access, wildlife control, tower visibility, aeronautical meteorology, Rescue and Fire Fighting Services, operational communications and inspection procedures.

OPERATIONAL SAFETY

Operational safety is not an additional component of the Master Plan. It is the criterion that should guide everything that is planned, built, reserved or postponed within the airport.

The Master Plan helps identify, classify and relate these conditions to development decisions. Its value is not only in pointing out deficiencies, but in establishing priorities for correction. Not all problems can be solved at the same time, especially where resources are limited, but all must be recognized, documented and placed within an improvement strategy.

Operational safety must also be understood in relation to infrastructure and operation. A runway may have enough length for certain aircraft but still present limitations due to pavement condition, obstacles, limited visual aids, drainage deficiencies or insufficient safety areas. A terminal may increase passenger capacity without the airside being ready to absorb more operations.

The Master Plan should distinguish between risks that require immediate action, risks that can be temporarily managed with operational measures and limitations that must be corrected through infrastructure investments. This distinction avoids both ignoring critical conditions and attempting to solve everything without technical priorities.

Operational safety is not only infrastructure. It depends equally on management, documentation, training, inspection, maintenance, institutional coordination and operational culture. The Master Plan does not replace these processes, but it can identify where infrastructure, procedures and organization must be strengthened.

In summary, operational safety is not an additional chapter of the Airport Master Plan; it is its foundation. Everything that is planned, built, reserved or postponed must be evaluated in terms of its impact on safe airport operation.

8. The Airport Master Plan and protection of the airport's future

One of the most important functions of the Airport Master Plan is to protect the airport's future. This protection is not limited to reserving spaces for potential future works. It also means preventing current decisions, even those that appear minor or urgent, from blocking strategic development options, reducing safety margins or unnecessarily increasing future costs.

An airport can lose its future silently. This does not always result from one major wrong decision. It may occur through the accumulation of partial occupation, poorly located facilities, uncoordinated permits, nearby construction, incompatible land uses, loss of available land, uncontrolled obstacles or projects executed without a common long-term vision.

The Master Plan must therefore identify not only what the airport needs to build, but also what it needs to protect. In airport planning, protection can be as important as construction. Protecting a runway strip, an obstacle limitation surface, an expansion

area, an access corridor, a drainage zone, a reserve for technical facilities or an aeronautical easement can avoid future technical, legal, operational and financial problems.

Urban growth around airports is one of the most common risks to future development. When housing, commerce, roads, antennas, poles, storage areas, waste disposal, industries or incompatible activities move too close to operational areas, the airport may become limited not by lack of will, but by lack of protected space.

FUTURE PROTECTION

An Airport Master Plan not only identifies works to be executed. It also defines the areas, easements, accesses and reserves that must be protected so the airport does not lose its development options.

In island airports, this protection is especially important. The territory is limited, land pressure is high and relocation alternatives are scarce. The airport may be near the sea, existing communities, tourism areas, environmentally sensitive areas or difficult terrain. Every available area must therefore be managed strategically.

Protection of the future also relates to obstacle limitation surfaces. An airport may be operational today, but if heights and surrounding land uses are not controlled, it may lose its ability to improve approaches, expand operations, incorporate visual aids or move toward more demanding safety and compliance conditions.

The Master Plan also supports institutional continuity. Airport development horizons are often longer than political and administrative cycles. A documented technical vision helps avoid restarting from zero each time authorities or priorities change, and helps coordinate contractors, investors, consultants and public entities working in different phases.

A well-planned airport is one that keeps options open. It can respond to demand changes, fleet evolution, new regulatory requirements, economic opportunities, climate events, emergency needs or strategic decisions without being trapped by irreversible physical decisions.

In summary, protecting the airport’s future means acting responsibly in the present. A Master Plan allows the airport to maintain direction, options and the capacity to evolve.

9. Demand, aircraft and operational capacity

Airport development must be based on a realistic understanding of the demand the airport serves today and could reasonably serve in the future. Without this analysis, infrastructure decisions may be oversized, underestimated or disconnected from true operational needs.

Demand should not be measured only by passenger numbers. Although passenger traffic is important, it does not by itself describe the complexity of the airport system. Aircraft movements, regional aviation, executive aviation, charter flights, cargo, medical flights, emergency operations, institutional flights, tourism-related services, seasonality and potential changes in aircraft types must also be considered.

Demand → Aircraft → Capacity → Infrastructure

The Master Plan translates market needs into operational and investment requirements.

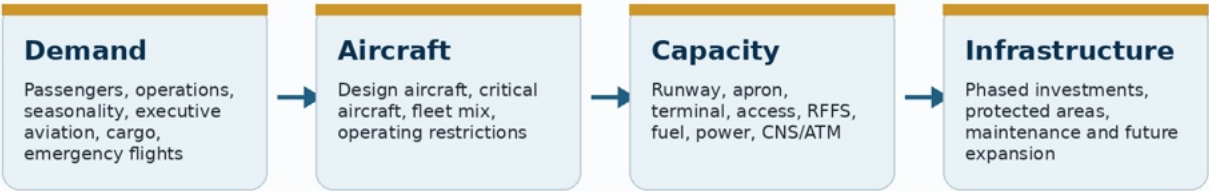


Figure. Airport demand must be converted into concrete operational criteria before defining infrastructure priorities.

Demand analysis is especially important in island airports. Annual averages can hide critical peak conditions. A moderate airport by annual figures may still face high pressure during tourism seasons, weekends, special events, charter arrivals, simultaneous

aircraft operations or high hotel occupancy periods. The Master Plan must identify these peak moments because they often reveal the true infrastructure constraints.

Demand should be translated into operations and aircraft types. The same number of passengers may create very different requirements depending on whether the market is served by turboprops, regional jets, executive aircraft, occasional charters or larger commercial aircraft. Each category affects runway, apron, taxiways, pavements, separations, visual aids, ramp services, terminal processes and emergency services differently.

DESIGN AIRCRAFT

The design aircraft should not be chosen by aspiration, but by its real relationship with demand, operational frequency, airport limitations and the investments required to serve it safely.

The concept of design aircraft or critical aircraft establishes criteria for sizing essential aerodrome components. Its geometry, operational characteristics and weight may influence runway length and width, taxiways, turning radii, separations, stands, strips, safety areas, aprons, pavement strength, visual aids and other safety-related elements.

However, the design aircraft should not be selected as an aspiration. It must be based on technical evaluation of frequency, regularity, viability, operational benefit, economic impact, physical restrictions and the actual capacity of the airport to serve it safely.

Operational capacity does not depend on a single component. A runway may be adequate for a particular aircraft, but the apron may not allow safe parking. The terminal may process passengers, but access roads, security, immigration, customs or baggage areas may be the real bottleneck. The airport is only as strong as the component that limits the system.

The Master Plan must therefore convert demand into technical requirements. More passengers may mean more operations, different aircraft, greater apron pressure, more terminal demand, higher security requirements, greater electrical load, more baggage, fuel needs, better access, stronger emergency response and greater operational coordination.

In summary, demand, aircraft and operational capacity are inseparable in the Airport Master Plan. Demand justifies needs; aircraft translate needs into design criteria; and operational capacity determines whether the airport can respond safely, efficiently and sustainably.

10. Airport infrastructure and investment priorities

Airport infrastructure must be developed according to a logical sequence of priorities. Not all works are equally urgent, not all produce the same operational impact and not all should be implemented in the same stage. One of the essential functions of the Airport Master Plan is to organize those priorities so investments respond to a coherent technical, economic and operational vision.

In many small, regional and island airports, needs are numerous and resources are limited. Pavements may need rehabilitation, drainage may require correction, aprons may need expansion, aircraft parking positions may need reorganization, visual aids may need modernization, electrical systems may need strengthening, terminals may require improvement, access roads may need expansion and critical areas may need protection.

Phased Development of the Airport Master Plan

From immediate safety needs to a long-term development vision.



Figure. A Master Plan converts development objectives into practical phases without closing future options.

The Master Plan distinguishes between what is critical, necessary, convenient and future-oriented. This classification should not be based only on political visibility or architectural appeal, but on real impact on operational safety, capacity, service continuity, economic efficiency and protection of the airport's future.

Priority investments are not always the most visible. In some cases, the first actions should focus on elements passengers barely notice but which are fundamental for safe operation: pavements, drainage, runway strips, safety areas, markings, aeronautical lighting, obstacle control, perimeter fences, emergency access, electrical systems, visual aids, maintenance and aeronautical information management.

INVESTMENT PRIORITY

The most urgent investment is not always the most visible work. In an airport, priority often lies in what protects operational safety, reduces risks and allows the system to function better.

The airside often concentrates sensitive decisions. Runway, taxiways, aprons, strips, safety areas, pavements, visual aids and drainage systems directly condition operational capacity. Deficiencies in any of these components can limit operations even if other facilities have been improved.

The apron deserves particular attention. In many small airports, the runway receives more attention than aircraft parking and maneuvering capacity. An insufficient apron can generate operational conflicts, scheduling restrictions, delays, ramp safety issues and limitations to growth.

Terminal investment should be analyzed as part of the passenger processing system, not only as a building. Its capacity depends on check-in, security, immigration, customs, baggage claim, internal circulation, accessibility, utilities, energy and its relationship with landside and airside areas.

The Master Plan also recognizes that sometimes the priority is not to build something new, but to reorganize, relocate or free critical areas. A poorly located technical facility can block future apron expansion. A parking area can interfere with terminal growth. A temporary installation can become a permanent constraint.

In summary, airport infrastructure should not grow by accumulating works. It should grow through technically justified priorities. A well-planned airport does not invest simply to build more; it invests to function better, operate more safely and keep future development options open.

Resilience, certification and institutional framework

This part addresses resilience, environmental sustainability, energy, certification readiness and the institutional framework required for the Master Plan to become a practical tool rather than a static document.

11. Environment, climate resilience and energy sustainability

Island airports develop in environments where climate, infrastructure and natural conditions are closely connected. Proximity to the sea, exposure to hurricanes, intense rainfall, strong winds, coastal erosion, flooding, sea-level rise, ecological sensitivity and limited land make environmental and climate planning an essential component of the Airport Master Plan.

In these airports, resilience is not an abstract concept. It means the real capacity of the airport to resist, adapt and recover from natural events that may affect its operation, infrastructure and connectivity. After a hurricane, flood, earthquake, medical emergency or logistics disruption, an island airport may become a critical facility for the territory.

Resilience, Energy and Certification Readiness

For island airports, sustainability is also an operational and economic requirement.



Climate resilience

Drainage, coastal protection, critical facilities and recovery capability



Energy sustainability

Solar generation, storage, backup power and efficient terminal systems



Certification readiness

Aerodrome Manual, data, inspections, maintenance and safety documentation

Figure. A resilient airport can maintain essential connectivity before, during and after disruptions.

The Master Plan must analyze the relationship between the airport and its physical environment from the earliest stages. Drainage, coastal protection, slope stability, stormwater management, location of critical installations, elevation of vulnerable areas, protection of electrical systems, continuity of access and operational recovery must all be part of the development vision.

Water management is especially sensitive. Insufficient drainage can deteriorate pavements, affect strips, cause flooding in access areas, weaken embankments and reduce the service life of investments. Water must be treated as a design factor, not as a secondary problem.

ENERGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

For island airports, solar energy is not only an environmental option. It can become an economic and strategic tool to reduce dependence, costs and operational vulnerability.

The proximity of the sea introduces additional challenges, including coastal erosion, wave action, salt intrusion, corrosion, vulnerability of roads, exposure of electrical installations and low-lying areas. Protecting airport infrastructure from the marine environment is a condition for operational continuity.

Energy sustainability is also increasingly relevant. Airports consume electricity continuously for terminal air conditioning, lighting, security, communications, visual aids, technical facilities, pumping, offices, emergency equipment and support services. When this energy depends on imported fuels or vulnerable networks, costs and risks increase.

In the Caribbean, solar radiation is a strategic resource that airports should not ignore. Terminal roofs, administrative buildings, hangars, parking areas, service zones and non-operational land can provide appropriate locations for photovoltaic systems if glare, location, maintenance and safety are compatible with airport operations.

Solar energy is not an absolute solution and does not replace all conventional systems immediately. But it can reduce operating costs, diversify energy supply, improve resilience, support critical loads and strengthen the airport's environmental performance. It should be analyzed together with storage, standby generators, microgrids, energy efficiency and protection of essential systems.

In summary, environment, climate resilience and energy sustainability are not secondary matters. For island airports, they are part of safety, economics and service continuity.

12. Master Plan and preparation for Aerodrome Certification

Aerodrome Certification is one of the most important processes for demonstrating that an airport has adequate technical, operational, documentary and institutional conditions to sustain safe operations under the applicable regulatory framework. It is not simply an administrative procedure, but an integrated assessment of the aerodrome's ability to operate under recognized safety and management standards.

The Airport Master Plan does not certify an aerodrome by itself. It does not replace the civil aviation authority, nor does it replace formal inspection, approval, oversight, authorization or certification procedures. However, it can become a valuable tool for preparing the path toward certification or higher levels of regulatory compliance.

This relationship is particularly important for small, regional and island airports. Many have evolved over the years in response to real connectivity, tourism and economic development needs, but without always having the full technical, documentary and organizational instruments now expected in modern certification processes.

Certification does not depend only on the existence of an operational runway. It requires analysis of the aerodrome as a complete system: physical characteristics, runway strips, safety areas, obstacle limitation surfaces, pavements, visual aids, markings, lighting, emergency services, wildlife control, maintenance, inspections, operational procedures, aeronautical data, risk management, institutional responsibilities and operator capability.

AERODROME CERTIFICATION

The Airport Master Plan does not certify the aerodrome, but it can create the technical, documentary and institutional basis for moving toward certification.

The Master Plan can support this process by contributing technical inventories, infrastructure evaluations, limitation identification, risk analysis, capacity studies, service diagnosis and priority definition. Without this basis, certification may become a fragmented reaction to regulatory observations instead of an organized compliance strategy.

One of the main contributions of the Master Plan is to identify gaps. These may relate to physical infrastructure, documentation, procedures, maintenance, human resources, emergency services, obstacle control, aeronautical information, visual aids, environmental management, wildlife control or institutional capacity. Identifying gaps is not a weakness; it is the first step toward correcting them.

Aerodrome Certification also requires documentation: Aerodrome Manual, emergency plans, maintenance programs, inspection procedures, wildlife hazard management, obstacle control, pavement management, reporting systems, defined responsibilities and internal/external coordination mechanisms. The Master Plan does not replace these documents, but helps reveal their need and their relationship with infrastructure.

In summary, the Airport Master Plan does not certify the aerodrome, but it can create the technical, documentary and institutional conditions to move toward that objective. An airport that plans its future seriously does not wait for certification to become urgent; it begins preparing from the moment it decides to organize its development.

13. The role of the State, airport operator and specialized consultants

The development of an airport does not depend only on the technical quality of a project. It also depends on institutional capacity to define objectives, coordinate decisions, assign responsibilities, protect the public interest and maintain a long-term vision. The Airport Master Plan must therefore be understood not only as a technical document, but also as a governance instrument.

The State has a fundamental role in airport planning. Even when airport operation is assigned to an airport authority, public company, autonomous entity, concession or private operator, the airport remains strategic national infrastructure. Its development affects connectivity, tourism, the economy, safety, emergency response, land-use planning and the country's international image.

The civil aviation authority has a different but essential role. Its primary function is not to promote works or decide investments, but to safeguard operational safety, regulatory compliance, technical oversight, surveillance, procedure approval and, where applicable, aerodrome certification. The Master Plan must respect those competencies.

The airport operator provides direct knowledge of daily operations. It understands real constraints, recurring conflicts, maintenance conditions, user needs, capacity problems, staff limitations and practical priorities that may not always appear in formal documents. Without active operator participation, the Master Plan may become theoretical and disconnected from reality.

AIRPORT GOVERNANCE

A Master Plan requires more than engineering. It needs State vision, operator commitment, regulatory oversight, institutional coordination and specialized technical advice.

Specialized consultants transform diverse needs, constraints and aspirations into a coherent technical vision. Their role is not limited to drawing development proposals; it includes analyzing the airport's reality, identifying limitations, evaluating alternatives, ordering priorities, defining phases, documenting risks, proposing feasible solutions and explaining the implications of each decision.

The Master Plan should facilitate dialogue among all parties. The State provides strategic vision; the operator provides operational experience; the civil aviation authority provides the regulatory framework; public institutions provide sector responsibilities; and specialized consultants integrate those elements into a verifiable technical proposal.

Private investors, contractors or developers may also be important, but their proposals must align with the overall Master Plan. No intervention should compromise critical areas, block future reserves, introduce operational risk or fragment airport development.

In summary, an Airport Master Plan requires State vision, operator commitment, regulatory oversight, institutional coordination and specialized technical advice. Only then can the Master Plan move from a well-prepared document to a real airport development tool.

PART V

Decision-making, financing and lessons for the Caribbean

This final part connects master planning with decision-making, financing, common errors and the practical lessons that Caribbean island airports offer for future development.

14. The Master Plan as a tool for financing and decision-making

A well-prepared Airport Master Plan does not only guide physical development. It is also an essential tool for decision-making and financing. Its value lies not only in showing how the airport can grow, but in explaining why growth is necessary, what benefits it produces, which risks it reduces and which investments should be prioritized.

Authorities, airport operators, financing institutions, investors and cooperation agencies need to understand clearly what problem a proposed investment is intended to solve. An isolated request may appear useful, but it is stronger when it forms part of a documented strategy with diagnosis, demand, priorities, phases, preliminary costs, expected benefits and relationship with operational safety.

In small airports, this clarity is especially important. Public budgets face many pressures: health, education, housing, roads, ports, energy, water and civil protection. Airport investment must therefore be justified not only as transport infrastructure, but as a contribution to connectivity, tourism, the economy, safety, resilience and national emergency response.

The Master Plan helps build that justification. It explains that pavement rehabilitation protects safety and service continuity; that an expanded apron allows safer and more efficient aircraft handling; that drainage is an investment in resilience and infrastructure life; and that an organized terminal is part of functional airport capacity.

DECISION AND FINANCING

A Master Plan converts dispersed needs into a defensible strategy. It explains what should be invested, why it matters, when it should be implemented and what benefits it produces for the airport and the country.

It also facilitates preparation of a project portfolio organized by stage, priority, operational urgency, economic impact, technical maturity or availability of financing. The airport can then present short-, medium- and long-term projects without losing overall coherence.

The Master Plan also acts as a technical filter for opportunities. A private proposal, grant or financing source may be attractive, but it must be evaluated against the overall airport vision. A financed project is not always a convenient project if it blocks future areas, introduces risks, duplicates functions or does not solve a real priority.

In summary, the Airport Master Plan is a tool for better decisions. It helps justify investments, prepare financing, organize projects, communicate priorities, evaluate opportunities and protect the public interest.

15. Common mistakes when an airport grows without a Master Plan

When an airport grows without a Master Plan, development often depends on partial decisions, operational urgencies, circumstantial opportunities or isolated projects. Some of these decisions may seem correct when adopted, but over time they can create constraints that are difficult to correct.

The problem is not always the individual quality of a work. A terminal may be well built, an apron may solve an immediate need, an access road may temporarily improve circulation and a technical facility may appear useful in the short term. If these interventions do not respond to a common vision, the airport may accumulate solutions that are disconnected from each other.

One frequent mistake is confusing urgency with strategy. An immediate operational need may require a rapid response, but that response should not compromise future development. Urgent works executed without considering the whole airport system may occupy critical areas, block expansion or create new operational interference.

Another common mistake is prioritizing visible works over necessary works. Buildings, facades or commercial areas may have public impact, while less visible but more critical elements remain unresolved: pavements, drainage, visual aids, emergency services, safety areas, lighting, electrical systems or apron configuration.

COMMON MISTAKE

An airport can execute individually correct works and still lose functional coherence. The problem is not always the work itself, but the absence of a vision that orders all decisions.

Loss of strategic land is another major consequence of poor planning. Areas required for future aprons, taxiways, technical installations, access roads, cargo areas, emergency services or terminal expansion may be occupied by incompatible uses or buildings that become costly to relocate.

Airports may also be constrained by what happens outside their perimeter: urbanization, antennas, roads, waste disposal sites, tourism developments, tall buildings, wildlife attractants, hazardous installations or incompatible land uses. Without coordinated planning, the surroundings can become more limiting than the internal infrastructure.

Other frequent mistakes include underestimating the apron, poorly locating technical facilities, misinterpreting demand, selecting an inappropriate design aircraft, failing to update aeronautical information, incorporating environmental management too late, building without maintenance capacity and allowing contractual fragmentation among different actors.

A Master Plan does not eliminate every risk, but it provides a technical defense against improvisation. It helps ensure that every investment contributes to the airport's future instead of creating a new limitation.

16. Lessons from Caribbean island airports

Caribbean island airports offer valuable lessons on the importance of Airport Master Planning. Although each country, island and airport has its own conditions, common patterns appear frequently: land constraints, proximity to the sea, natural obstacles, urban pressure, environmental sensitivity, tourism dependence, financial limitations and the constant need to maintain air connectivity.

Many of these airports were not originally conceived for the operational, regulatory, environmental and commercial requirements they face today. Some were designed for modest traffic, smaller aircraft, predominantly visual operations or less complex service conditions. Over time, tourism growth, fleet evolution, higher passenger expectations, stronger safety requirements and economic pressure forced them to adapt.

That adaptation has not always occurred through integrated planning. In many cases, airports have grown through partial expansions, urgent rehabilitation, terminal improvements, apron adjustments, drainage works, runway extensions or technical service upgrades without a sufficiently integrated vision. The problem is not that these works were unnecessary, but that each solution must be understood in relation to the airport's future system.

The first lesson is that physical limitation does not eliminate the need for planning; it increases it. In an island, where land is scarce and expansion may be constrained by the sea, mountains, communities or sensitive environments, every meter has strategic value.

CARIBBEAN LESSON

For island airports, physical limitation does not reduce the importance of planning. It increases it, because every land-use, infrastructure and operational decision can condition the airport's future.

The second lesson is that an island airport must be viewed as critical national infrastructure, even when its physical scale is small. In many Caribbean territories, the airport supports tourism, regional mobility, medical services, emergency response, investment, supply and the country's international image.

The third lesson is that modernization must be proportional. A small airport does not need to copy the complexity of a major international hub to be safe, efficient and competitive. It needs to identify its real functions, strengthen critical weaknesses, protect its future, improve the user experience and create conditions for growth that fit its territory and economy.

The Caribbean experience also shows that resilience, energy, certification readiness and institutional continuity must be integrated into airport planning. The limitation is not impossibility. With serious, realistic and progressive planning, an island airport can improve safety, strengthen resilience, protect its future and contribute decisively to national development.

Conclusion

The Airport Master Plan is much more than a physical planning document. It is a strategic tool for organizing growth, protecting operational safety, justifying investments, preserving future opportunities and guiding airport development within a coherent technical, institutional and economic vision.

This publication has emphasized that an airport should not grow through the accumulation of isolated works or improvised responses to urgent needs. Every decision related to a runway, apron, terminal, access road, technical installation, visual aid, drainage system, land reserve or support service can influence the safety, capacity and future of the complete airport system.

The Master Plan makes it possible to understand those relationships. It analyzes the airport as an integrated system where airside, landside, technical services, territorial context, demand, aircraft, operational capacity, environment, resilience, certification and institutional governance interact.

For small, regional and island airports, this vision is even more important. Limited land, coastal location, natural obstacles, urban pressure, environmental sensitivity, restricted finances and strong dependence on air connectivity require more rigorous planning. In these cases, the Master Plan is not a technical luxury or an administrative formality; it is a practical tool for avoiding costly mistakes and protecting development options.

Planning does not mean building everything immediately. It means knowing what should come first, what can wait, what must be protected and which present decisions should not block future solutions. Master planning converts general aspirations into a technically possible path.

Operational safety must remain at the center of that vision. Growth only makes sense if it reduces risks, organizes operations, strengthens services, improves procedures, protects critical areas and creates conditions for higher levels of compliance.

Environment, climate resilience and energy sustainability are also inseparable from modern airport planning. For island airports, hurricanes, intense rainfall, coastal erosion, flooding, corrosion, electrical interruptions and dependence on imported fuels require airports to be planned as resilient infrastructure capable of resisting, recovering and operating efficiently.

The Master Plan does not certify an aerodrome by itself, but it can create the conditions for higher levels of compliance and certification readiness. By organizing technical information, identifying gaps, prioritizing improvements, strengthening documentation and supporting coordination with the civil aviation authority, it becomes a bridge between current reality and future regulatory maturity.

For Caribbean island airports, the lesson is clear: limited scale does not reduce national responsibility. A small airport can be strategically vital. With serious planning, realism and continuity, an island airport can improve safety, protect its future and strengthen the country it serves.

An airport that aspires to modernize needs more than works. It needs direction, continuity and a future vision.

Planning does not mean stopping development. It means giving development direction, safety and future.

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L. Perez Perez Eng.MSc.

President, Perez Engineering Consulting Services Ltd.

Perez Engineering Consulting

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TECHNICAL INSIGHT SERIES — AIRPORT PLANNING

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www.pecs-ltd.com



info@pecs-ltd.com



P.O. Box 1234
St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda

AVIATION FOR RESILIENT ISLAND COMMUNITIES