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Flying Car Leaders Talk Public Perception at a Secret Summit

At a Texas conference hosted by Ross Perot Jr., air taxi innovators focused on how to get the public onboard with their ideas.



PHOTOGRAPH: ERIC ADAMS

In the few short years that the modern electric air taxi movement has been gestating—launching in earnest with Uber's October 2016 proposal for such a service—attention has swirled around the key technological and policy focused on what may be the greatest enabler, or hurdle, of this new way of moving the public.

You know, the folks who'll actually be riding in these newfangled contraptions. Do they understand how they work? Will they be comfortable flying through the air in small, and eventually unmanned, vehicles? It's not enough to promise that these aircraft will be quieter than helicopters or show off CGI animations of a typical flight. If these things are going to fill the skies, the people who today are on the ground must be onboard, metaphorically as much as literally.

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That was the essence of the message delivered by former Wyoming governor Matt Mead to an industry gathering at a ranch outside of Dallas last month. "I tell people I'm going to an eVTOL gathering and they think I mean a health conference," he said at TexasUP, an invitation-only, unannounced summit that followed a similar event held in Arkansas last year. "You folks all live in this world and you understand it so very well. But for a lay person like

mean, then they say, 'Oh, are you talking about flying cars?'

Mead's point was not just that the industry needs to stamp out or standardize jargon but that doing so will help push citizens, including politicians, to support it. The public is generally good with the idea of electric air taxis, according to a [study released early this year](#) by Airbus, though they have concerns around safety and noise. But studies have yet to gauge attitudes toward the broader impact of the technology. "We have to talk about the benefits and the realization of the dream—the amount of hours saved commuting, what it would mean to the GDP, what it would mean for public safety, search and rescue, and more," Mead said. "Plus, this is an opportunity to democratize our airspace, and to do it safely."



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To reach the best likelihood for success, this argument goes, air taxis should benefit as many, and annoy as few,

[Los Angeles is weighing legislation to ban non-emergency helicopter use, in an effort to address noise and safety concerns.](#)

“It’s going to require communities and regulatory bodies and governments to endorse it,” Nikhil Goel, Uber’s aviation product lead, said at the summit. “You have to have a critical mass of people clamoring for the technology and the way it’s going to transform their lives.”

This talk of reaching common ground-dwellers struck an interesting note at a conference to which only 200 or so people were invited (most eVTOL events draw 10 times that). The crowd included plenty of celebrities. The summit’s inaugural UP Award went to Martine Rothblatt. The Sirius Satellite Radio founder is backing eVTOL startup Beta Technologies in the hope that [its funky flyer](#) will help her new company, United Therapeutics, deliver its man-made organs.

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— MATT MEAD, FORMER GOVERNOR OF WYOMING

The event was organized by aviation entrepreneurs Cyrus Sigari and Ben Marcus and hosted by Ross Perot Jr. Perot took the opportunity to talk up Alliance, Texas, a planned development he created north of Dallas that includes the nation’s first airport that’s entirely without conventional passenger service. It instead provides business aviation and cargo service for companies with large facilities in town, including Amazon, Craftsman, FedEx, and Facebook. Perot pitched it as a testing ground for new aircraft and a source of early customers for commercial eVTOL services. That could mean moving personnel and supplies or, as would be the case with BNSF Railway, to inspect and maintain sprawling infrastructure. (Uber is also targeting Dallas as an early test site for an air taxi pilot.)

The conference featured a motivational talk by former President George W. Bush. Former Tesla CTO JB Straubel

fresh tech to see: Uber’s Richard Wang discussed his company’s 70 percent improvement in minimum-ion battery capacity, Near Earth Autonomy talked up autonomous control advances, Skyports argued that well-designed passenger terminals can generate a sense of both excitement and familiarity in the public, and more.

On the conference’s unofficial theme—how to bring the public onboard—the most impressive speaker may have been Ken Dial, whose [University of Montana Flight Laboratory](#) studies bird flight in order to improve human aviation. He wanted to hit on the wonder of flight, a sentiment easily lost in business-focused conversations, but that could inspire a wary public to take a flight. So he talked about the little understood capability of certain predatory birds to keep their heads perfectly stabilized while homing in on prey, even as their bodies and wings gyrate. He explained the hummingbird’s astonishing speed and maneuvering capability while dodging obstacles or attacks, and the bar-tailed godwit’s ability to fly nonstop from Alaska to New Zealand. “If you’re not impressed by that, I don’t even like you,” Dial said. But really, it doesn’t matter what impressed the conference-goers. Their job will be to impress the public—and get them to like the idea of a new way of moving through the sky.

Story updated at 13:35 ET on Thursday December 5, 2019 to include the role of Cyrus Sigari and Ben Marcus.

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