



Hudson and Associates, LLC

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STL Launches AMAC's Runway to Success Supplier Pitch Competition

Shelia Hudson Leads as Honorary Chair

Shelia Hudson is a trailblazer in the aviation industry, widely recognized for her leadership, innovation, and unwavering advocacy. As President and CEO of Hudson and Associates – a firm specializing in airport concessions, food and beverage services, retail operations and on-street parking management for municipalities – she has built a strong reputation for creating business opportunities where barriers once stood.

Beyond her leadership at Hudson and Associates, Shelia serves as the Central Regional Director of the Airport Minority Advisory Council (AMAC) Board of Directors, where she champions greater access for small, minority-, and women-owned businesses seeking to break into the competitive world of airport and aerospace ecosystems.

Her influence expanded when Ricky Smith, AMAC's Board Chairman and General Manager of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL), tapped her to lead the newly formed AMAC Supplier Initiative Pathway Committee (SIP). Composed of top executives from airport concessions and the architecture, engineering, and construction sectors, the committee was tasked with creating initiatives to bridge the gap between suppliers and airport decision-makers.

Its flagship initiative – The AMAC Runway to Success *Shark Tank-style* Supplier Pitch Competition was a year in the making, Runway to Success attracted hundreds of applicants nationwide. Entrepreneurs who made the cut competed in two rounds: the "Ready for Takeoff 8" (regional competitions) and the "Final Approach 4" (national finals).

Modeled after the popular NCAA Tournament format and *Shark Tank-style* pitching, this groundbreaking competition provides entrepreneurs with a direct pathway to pitch their products and ideas live before top airport decision-makers and leading concessionaires.

"The *Shark Tank-style* competition was selected because we wanted a format that energized participants while engaging airport concessionaires and investors," Hudson explained. The competition quickly became one of the most anticipated events within AMAC and the broader aviation community.

St. Louis: A Natural Choice for Round 1 Regional Competition

On May 16, St. Louis Lambert International Airport (STL), through its Office of Business Opportunities (OBO), hosted the inaugural round of Runway to Success. One of only two airports selected – alongside Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport (BTR) – STL welcomed 17 companies to pitch their products before a panel of industry leaders.

"STL's involvement was not just about providing a venue – it was about embracing innovation and creating a platform for businesses to showcase their talent and gain access to decision-makers from airports across the country," Hudson said.

The selection process was rigorous, with applications evaluated based on innovation, business readiness, scalability, financial strength, and the ability to thrive in the unique airport environment. From this competitive pool, four companies from STL and four from BTR – collectively dubbed the "Elite 8" – advanced to the national finals on July 1 at the AMAC 40th Airport Business Conference, hosted by Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport (MSY).

"The national stage for Runway to Success in New Orleans was absolutely incredible," Hudson said. "It was a larger-than-life, standing-room-only audience, the judges were inspiring, and the energy in the room was electric."

The VIP judging panel featured airport executives alongside representatives from Paradies Lagardère, Hudson by Avolta, SSP America, and Areas USA – global powerhouses in travel, dining, and retail.

"The excitement among the competitors was off the charts. Every entrepreneur poured their hearts and souls into their pitches, and from the "Elite 8," four advanced to the final round. But the real victory was that every single participant walked away with a deal," Hudson said with pride.

Some businesses received opportunities to pilot their products at multiple airport locations, others secured concession offers in large markets, and several gained mentoring and coaching to make their businesses more market-ready.

"I'm especially proud of the four businesses representing St. Louis at the national competition—they showcased the depth of our region's entrepreneurial talent and the readiness of their products for the airport market," Hudson said. The final four included Bitoy's Sweet Treats, TeaVolia, Good Boy Goodies, and Posie Pots.

On behalf of AMAC Chairman Ricky Smith and AMAC President & CEO Eboni Wimbush, Hudson added, "We are deeply grateful to STL for the exposure it gave this competition. Beyond the event itself, STL has continued to engage the community, highlighting competitors' success stories and inspiring other entrepreneurs to participate. The opportunities this platform creates are invaluable, and we're thrilled for those who advanced and for the broader impact it fosters."

The Road Ahead

Looking ahead, AMAC plans to expand the Runway to Success Competition into additional airports, engaging a wider pool of entrepreneurs and industry partners. Hudson, recently re-elected to a second term as AMAC Central Regional Director, is leading the effort alongside members of the Supplier Initiative Pathway Committee and AMAC's national office.

Her priorities include launching an AMAC chapter in St. Louis, creating partnerships with organizations such as the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, and collaborating with colleges and universities that have business incubators to help prepare the next generation of entrepreneurs interested in doing business in the airport space.

"The overall goal is to create a sustained pathway for these businesses – not just to enter the airport market, but to thrive long-term," Hudson said. "We want to see more airports, more suppliers, and more industry partners join this initiative in the coming years."

Standing strong for forty years, the AMAC Airport Business Conference continues its legacy of impact and innovation. The 41st Annual Conference is set for June 10–14, 2026, in National Harbor, Maryland, with Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport (BWI) serving as the host partner. Runway to Success will once again take center stage.

Hudson's advice for entrepreneurs eyeing next year's competition: "Know your story, know your numbers, and know why your company belongs in the airport space. Passion and preparation are key – and always connect your product to solving a traveler's needs, because that's what truly resonates with airport decision-makers."