

Game of drones

A South Jersey defense, aerospace hub would be economic boom for state

June 10, 2013 3:00AM

By [Joshua Burd](#)

Mention the word “drones” in conversation, and it's likely to conjure images of the war on terror and surveillance missions. But in South Jersey, business and industry leaders are hoping to turn the conversation to commercial use of unmanned aircraft, like crop dusting and package delivery — and economic development.



South Jersey’s existing higher education and aerospace research infrastructure are behind a bid to designate the area as a federal testing site for drones. That would bring economic investment to the region, say experts.

Within months, New Jersey will learn whether it will become a federal testing site for aerial drones, a designation that could help further the state's potential as a hub for the aerospace and defense industries. In South Jersey, experts say, work is underway to build the types of relationships among government, business and academia that can create such an industry cluster and attract new companies.

“Unmanned aircraft is the next frontier of aerospace industry investment,” said John Boyd, a Princeton-based relocation consultant who said “we've been monitoring this very closely over the past several months on behalf of our aerospace clients.”

One recent source of momentum has been the planned, but long stalled, NextGen Aviation Research and Technology Park, in Egg Harbor Township, which would serve as a testing ground for new FAA flight systems. The park is slated to become an offshoot of Richard Stockton College under an agreement announced in April, putting it in the hands of a stable academic partner after six years of setbacks and funding issues.

The seven-building park would expand from the William J. Hughes Technical Center, a 55-year-old Federal Aviation Administration facility, and supporters hope the complex is a key selling point in its application for drone testing. A major function of the existing facility is to draw contractors as tenants and connect them with FAA researchers.

“I would find it hard to believe that private-sector contractors are not going to see a benefit in being located on a site with federal engineers and federal laboratories,” said U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo (R-Mays Landing), who helped spearhead the state's application and also chairs the House Aviation Subcommittee.

New Jersey, which is partnering with Virginia in a proposal that includes dozens of entities, is competing against 25 other applicants from 24 states, federal officials said. The FAA in February solicited applications to develop six unmanned aircraft systems research and test sites nationwide, following a decision in 2012 to start integrating the so-called UAS into the national airspace over the next several years.

The agency will weigh factors like geographic and climatic diversity, location of ground infrastructure and research needs, population, and air traffic density. An FAA spokeswoman said the agency should make its selections by the end of this year.

Becoming a testing site “can be a game changer,” said Boyd, principal of The Boyd Co. Inc., whose clients include firms like Messier-Bugatti-Dowty, the global manufacturer of landing gear.

“I can guarantee you these companies are watching this play out very, very closely,” Boyd said. “And if New Jersey succeeds in being one of these designated drone testing centers, along with what's happening with the FAA and NextGen, we expect (the state) to really attract a significant share of the new aerospace industry.”

Advocates already are projecting the economic benefits of integrating unmanned aircraft. In March, the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International issued a report that said the nationwide economic benefit would be more than \$13.6 billion by 2017, including \$263 million and more than 1,300 jobs in New Jersey.

Boyd said the aerospace industry is one “that places a premium upon intellectual capital,” and institutions like Stockton are stepping in to meet that demand. Aside from its stewardship of the NextGen park, the Galloway college plans to expand its programs in engineering, business and others that dovetail with aviation, said its president, Herman Saatkamp. He said private-sector researchers and executives at the park will likely seek appointments at a major academic institution, which Stockton can provide.

“We've got major components here in South Jersey that can really build an avionics center for the nation, but also can begin to build relationships with each other,” said Saatkamp, a former president of the park's board. He said the region already is home to major companies like Lockheed Martin and Boeing, not to mention the Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst.

But advocates for bringing drone testing to the Garden State are grappling with a series of bills in Trenton that call for banning or restricting such drones by police and fire departments. A lobbyist for the industry said 40 states have floated potential “anti-UAS legislation,” and such measures can “confuse” the debate to the point of threatening a state's prospects for becoming a test site.

“The FAA may decide not to award a test site to the applicant that restricts their potential use,” said Mario Mairena, government relations manager for the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International.

“That is a key provision when you're talking about economic impact.”

LoBiondo, the South Jersey congressman, said security and safety are “two critical primary concerns,” adding that privacy protections already have been outlined in the state's proposal with Virginia.

“I don't know what you tell somebody who doesn't give you a chance to fix a problem,” he said. “But I think anyone who's interested in this area should know and understand that this will be a complete and total priority.”

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