

Local economic leaders hope to make NW FL leader in unmanned vehicles

October 07, 2011 7:57 PM, Dusty Ricketts Daily News

The late Apple founder Steve Jobs knew as he was creating products that revolutionized the digital music player, smart phone and tablet computing industries that you don't focus on what's big today. Especially when it comes to high-tech industries, leaders must focus on what are going to be the hot items in the future. Local economic development leaders believe one of the biggest military and commercial industries over the next 25 years is going to be the development of unmanned air and ground vehicles. They hope to put Northwest Florida at the forefront of that industry.

"You try to look down the road. What are the emerging technologies and industries?" said Jim Breitenfeld, who is leading a subgroup of the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council's TeCMEN group. Breitenfeld's panel is devoted to expanding the unmanned air vehicles (UAV) business in the county.

"When you look down the road, I don't think there's any question that this unmanned or remotely piloted vehicle is the wave of the future both militarily, commercially and with so many uses," he said. "We're trying to position ourselves. You want a magnet, something that's going to attract folks."

The magnet could be the proposed 45,000-square-foot UAV test center planned for south of the University of Florida's Research and Engineering Education Facility (REEF) on Lewis Turner Boulevard. The EDC is conducting a feasibility study on the facility and hopes to receive grants to help fund the estimated \$1.5 million project.

"This is the future. The growth potential for this industry is enormous," said EDC President Larry Sassano. "It's a multi-billion dollar industry. Right now, most of it is being done in the military. We see more DOD dollars being spent on unmanned vehicles than just about any other area other than Special Ops.

"Everybody has used the word diversification to revitalize the economy," Sassano added. "This is diversification. It's technology diversification and it's emerging technology. It's innovative and it has all the buzz words that the state and federal government are looking at today to support with funding for the creation of good, high-paying jobs."

The University of Florida already does UAV research at its REEF building, but is limited because of space, said David Jeffcoat, a systems engineering professor with the university. Unmanned vehicles can range in size from an insect to a Boeing 737. The proposed facility would be used to test the smaller unmanned vehicles.

"The idea of a new facility is to give us more space, space to actually test some prototype vehicles," Jeffcoat said. "Right now, we don't really have that. We have to go outdoors or try to go onto the Eglin reservation, which is difficult to schedule."

The unmanned or remotely piloted vehicles are definitely a growing market. The Department of Defense has 35 times more unmanned vehicles in its inventory today than it did 10 years ago, said Terry Proulx, senior staff analyst for the defense contracting firm ARINC. Proulx said the Air Force has more unmanned aircraft in its inventory than it has bombers.

While the primary application for unmanned operations now is the military, Proulx said that is changing. Unmanned air vehicles are being used to assist in law enforcement, firefighting and border security. A power company in Australia is even using them to inspect utility lines for damage rather than have an employee climb poles.

"The military applications for this technology are all well and good, and they've made a significant impact in the wars at this point, but I think everybody will agree that the potential for the commercial applications of this are really going to dwarf that," Proulx said. "It's really going to take off."