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Ohio in 'strong position' to win drone site

Springfield-Dayton region needs more engineers, company tells lawmakers.

By Andrew McGinn

COLUMBUS — Companies wanting to develop unmanned aircraft systems are "sitting there waiting" for six areas of the country to get the OK to test-fly drones, the vice president of a Fortune 500 defense company told Ohio lawmakers Tuesday.

But the state essentially doesn't have a Plan B if it fails to win a test-site designation later this year that will serve as a magnet for those new aerospace jobs.

"We're not thinking of the possibility of losing right now," Wayne Struble, director of policy for Gov. John Kasich, told lawmakers Tuesday at the Statehouse as part of the second annual gathering of the Ohio Senate and House Joint Aerospace Caucus.

The caucus, formed last year by state Sen. Chris Widener, R-Springfield, and state Rep. Jim Butler, R-Oakwood, held a panel discussion to brief lawmakers on the status of Ohio's effort to become a hub of UAS research and development.

A key part of that is winning one of six test ranges that will help the Federal Aviation Administration integrate drones into manned airspace in 2015.

State and local leaders have envisioned using existing facilities at the Springfield-Beckley Municipal Airport and the Wilmington Air Park for the takeoff and recovery of commercial and civil drones during the testing period. Springfield also wants to build a new hangar complex at the airport to accommodate aerospace companies looking to locate here.

By partnering last year with Indiana, which has prized restricted airspace, Ohio is in a strong position to win a test site, panelists said.

Initial guesses are that 50 sites in 37 states will be in competition for the test sites, according to Joe Zeis, chairman of the Ohio Aerospace and Aviation Council and executive vice president of the Dayton Development Coalition.

The development coalition is in charge of coordinating and submitting the Ohio-Indiana test site application, which reflects the Dayton-Springfield region's status as ground zero for unmanned aircraft in Ohio, thanks largely to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. The application process ends May 6.

The Fortune 500 company Science Applications International Corp., better known as SAIC, has expanded in the region in recent years to establish stronger ties with Wright-Patt. At the company's new Springfield location, SAIC builds UAS payloads with help from local suppliers, said Dennis Andersh, senior vice president for the Dayton region.

Despite the area's eagerness to embrace drones, Andersh told lawmakers Tuesday that the region's labor force of engineers is weak. SAIC, he said, has resorted to importing engineers from the coasts to do the work.

"The labor force is a key element to support this business," he said.

Ohio's stiffest competition for a test site likely comes from Oklahoma, North Dakota, and efforts by Maryland, Virginia and New Jersey, Zeis said. When state government threw its backing behind the effort two years ago, he said, it catapulted Ohio onto the national stage for unmanned aircraft.

"We know of some states that are aggressively pursuing this," said Struble, a chief of staff to former U.S. Rep. David Hobson of Springfield. "We believe we have a lot to offer the FAA. We want to be a partner with the FAA to help them solve technical problems."

The state also envisions creating a UAS test center with Indiana to oversee range operations. The facility would be close to the airspace and connected to Wright-Patterson, Struble said.

It would be managed by three executive-level positions — a center director, chief technical officer and safety assurance officer.

"Safety is going to be critical to this operation," Struble said.

States are lining up to get in on the development of commercial drones — which one day will be used predominately for precision agriculture and law enforcement — primarily because of the riches they promise.

Estimates vary for how much the global UAS industry will generate, Zeis said. A recent industry report calculated that Ohio alone could see \$2.1 billion in economic development from unmanned aircraft systems by 2025.

"They all end in a 'b' in terms of the industry size," he said. "That's billions of dollars."