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Wilmington vies to transform Air Park into UAV test site

Jon Newberry, DBJ Contributor

Three years after DHL pulled out and left Clinton County with a mostly unused airport and industrial park, unmanned drones and the Federal Aviation Administration may be coming to the rescue.

The Wilmington Air Park is expected to be a prime candidate for one of six proposed test sites for unmanned aircraft and systems mandated by an FAA reauthorization bill in February. The FAA launched a formal search for the sites earlier this month when it published a request for public comment on March 7. The test sites are part of its program to integrate unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, into the nation’s air traffic system by 2015 so they can safely share the same airspace.

Many public officials are hoping that testing activity will attract research and manufacturing businesses to the area, which is close to the state’s aerospace corridor anchored by GE Aviation in Evendale and Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton.

Clinton County lost 8,000 jobs when DHL shut down its Wilmington air hub in 2009, devastating its economy. Economic development officials have been looking into a variety of alternative uses for the airport to bring back jobs and tax revenue. But no one is making any predictions at this point about how many jobs UAV testing might lead to.

“From my perspective this is the very beginning of a long-term, very broad industry with many potential paths,” said Bret Dixon, the county’s economic development director.

U.S. Air Force testing of certain unmanned aviation systems at the Wilmington Air Park is already beginning under a separate program, said Kevin Carver, executive director of the Clinton County Port Authority. Being selected as an FAA test site for non-military UAVs would add to that momentum, he said.

“We’re ready, willing and able to jump into that fray and compete as soon as we know what the FAA’s process will be. We’re anxious to get started,” Carver said.

The expectation is that there will initially be a lot of military activity, and that it can be parlayed into private-sector jobs with contractors involved in the manufacture of UAVs and the sensor arrays and systems that are deployed on those vehicles, he said.

Carver didn’t have any estimate of how long it would take or how many jobs might be generated. But in addition to the air park’s land, facilities and runways, its proximity to GE Aviation and many other aerospace manufacturers should help attract new businesses, he said.

The area’s congressional representatives, including Rep. Mike Turner and Sens. Rob Portman and Sherrod Brown, helped get wording into the reauthorization bill that boosts Wilmington’s prospects, Carver said.

Those efforts increased the number of tests sites from four to six and also ensured that ground infrastructure and research needs will be taken into account during the site selection process, said Portman’s press secretary Christine Mangi. Nearby Wright-Patterson has highly regarded infrastructure, research radars and sensor equipment, she said.

Carver cited Wilmington’s proximity to Wright-Patt, and in particular the Air Force Research Laboratory there, as one of the big factors in its favor, because it would give Air Force officials easier access to the UAV test site. The air park is about 25 miles from Wright-Patt.

Other assets include a large commercial airport with little traffic, surrounding farm land that is sparsely populated, and the park’s proximity to the Buckeye and Brush Creek airspaces southeast of Wilmington that are designated for military aircraft training, Carver said.

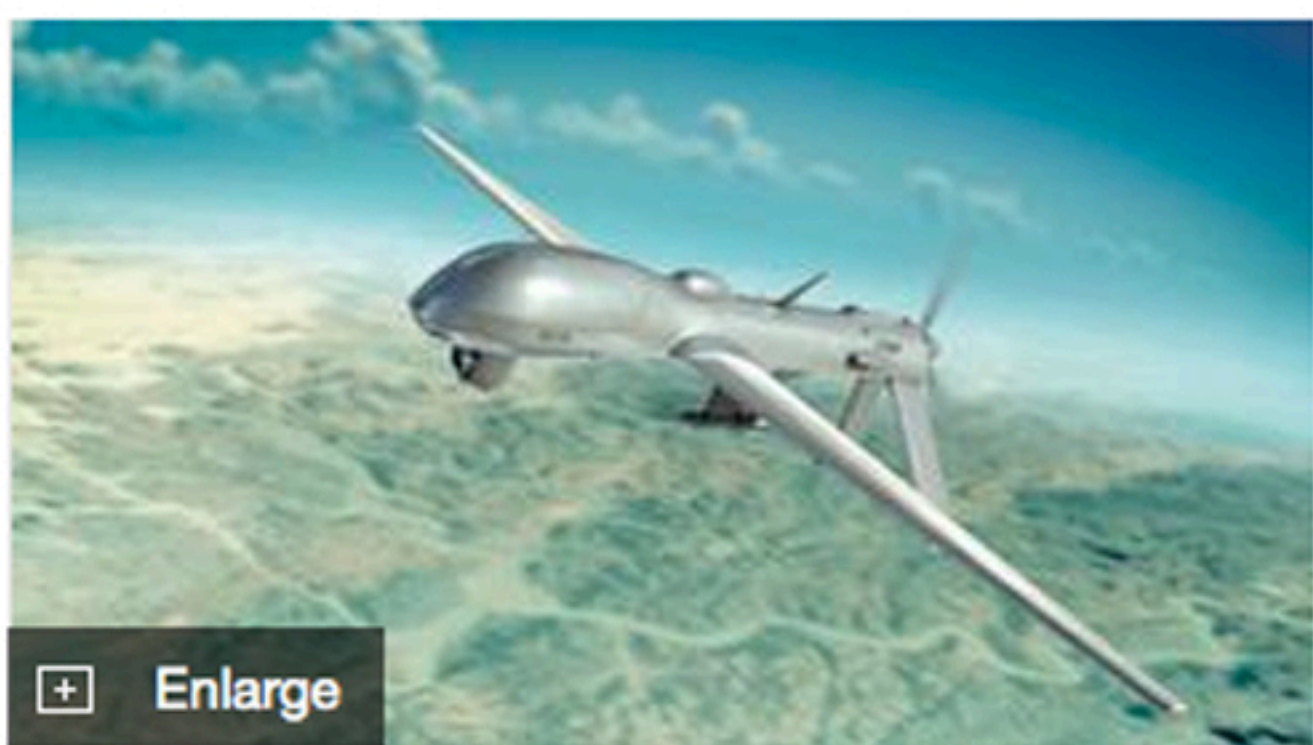
The air park itself covers 1,900 acres, much of which is developable, and has 2.5 million square feet under roof. Only about 500,000 square feet of that space is leased, he said. The park’s two parallel runways are 10,700 and 9,000 feet long, with full-instrument landing facilities similar to those found at major metropolitan airports, he said.

Portman’s office and the Ohio Aerospace and Aviation Council have organized a “aerospace jobs summit” at GE on April 4. It’s billed as a strategic gathering of government and industry leaders to discuss growth opportunities. Speakers include GE Aviation CEO David Joyce and the head of supply chain management at Boeing Co. Unmanned systems is one of the topics on the agenda.

GE, the world’s largest manufacturer of jet engines, doesn’t have much of a role in UAVs because it doesn’t make small enough jet engines, but its subsidiary GE Aviation Systems might have a play at some point, spokesman Rick Kennedy said.

GE Aviation Systems has developed a satellite-based system that creates “highways in the sky” to direct flights along an optimum route from take-off to landing. GE has been trying to sell the system to the FAA as part of the agency’s NextGen air traffic management system.

The FAA’s acting administrator Michael Huerta visited GE headquarters on March 13 to test drive the company’s flight simulator and was briefed on GE’s system. Integration of unmanned aircraft is one of the big tasks the NextGen system will have to handle, Huerta said.



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