

ACC to invest in unmanned aircrafts

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ALPENA - Alpena Community College intends to invest \$468,750 it will receive from a Skilled Trade Equipment Fund Grant into a mobile command center and four unmanned aircrafts. ACC was one of 18 state community colleges selected to receive a share of \$50 million in funds via the Skilled Trade Equipment Program and announced by Governor Rick Snyder Monday. The impact of the new equipment will have benefits for the unmanned aircraft system project at the Alpena County Regional Airport, as well as future career studies for the students at the college.

Snyder announced the Michigan Economic Development Corporation approved the recipients and ACC is to receive the needed money for trade tools and the training center, as long as it provides a 25 percent match which equates to \$156,250. The total amount in new investments for the new unmanned aircraft equipment will be in the \$625,000 range.

As a member of the Northern Michigan Unmanned Aerial Systems Consortium (NMUASC), which includes other educational institutions, the college is a critical piece to helping the program flourish and provide the technical skills for future employment needs.

NMUASC board member and ACC Vice-President or Work Force Development Don MacMaster said ACC sees unmanned aircraft training, testing and development as an opportunity to help teach students the technical skills needed to work with, and on, unmanned aircraft systems. He said a program at ACC could mirror the remotely operated vehicles that are bring used in the water.

"I would say it will be comparable to the marine tech program and lead to a short term certificate or longer term associates degree for students," MacMaster said. "We already have expertise in one space and would like to build something comparable, accept in the air."

The college is responsible for a 25 percent match to the state funds committed by the state and much of the money is earmarked for what it will be used for. MacMaster said while visiting one of Canada's center of excellence research facilities he learned more about critical equipment Alpena needs to navigate aircrafts safely. He included a pair of equipment requests in the grant application, including one for a mobile command center unit, which will be used to fly the aircrafts and four fully equipped drones for training and testing.

"The mobile command center is basically like a cockpit and has computers and everything is wireless," McMaster said. "The aircrafts aren't the tiny mosquito type, but larger ones equipped with cameras and also sensors which will sense and avoid other air traffic. These pieces are critical to our goals."

Airport manager Steve Smigelski said Monday's news was welcome and falls in line with goals the NMUASC has set. He said in order to provide the best unmanned aircraft service, highly trained professionals will be needed. He expects the college to help provide them to the area.

"This is a good thing, because if we become as big an institution for the testing as we hope we will also need to develop a pool of people to work in this field. It would benefit the local populous and the NMUASC as well."

Alpena County Commissioner Lyle Van Wormer, who has been involved in the airport project since its inception more than three years ago, said having ACC as a partner and resource has been the plan all along. Even before an attempt was made to acquire one of six center of excellence designations for unmanned aircraft testing began.

"We have wanted to have the college involved since day one," Van Wormer said. "To have classes out there and to interact was all thought out in the beginning and now it is becoming a reality."

The state took some criticism locally for not contributing more money to be used during the pursuit of one of the center of excellence sites, but with Snyder's announcement Tuesday Van Wormer said he is hopeful the state and the MEDC will be open to future support of the project if needed.

"I think this is just another one of the ducks falling in a row," Van Wormer said. "I think the bubble is going to break pretty soon and we will see action at the airport, because all the recent good news were critical parts to the entire project."

Of the 18 colleges ACC was the only school who requested funds for unmanned aircraft system related materials.

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