

Up, Up And Away For Drone Industry

By Christina Haley O'Neal, posted Jun 30, 2017 on WilmingtonBiz.com

One day after the Federal Aviation Administration implemented its Part 107 rule allowing the commercial use of unmanned aircraft systems or drones, Ben Neville started his business.

Neville, owner of Drone's Eye and instructor of Cape Fear Community College's Drone Foundations course, said drone technology has since expanded beyond the military or household toys. Now commercial use has sparked a growing market as more companies are taking advantage of drones to facilitate and enhance business.

"There is a lot of competition. It's one of those markets now where it's new and is in its infancy. So everyone is trying to figure out their niche," Neville said.

While drones have grown in popularity for several years, there were technically no regulations of drones for business reasons. The FAA rules regulating the commercial use of drones, which include examinations and height restrictions, went into effect Aug. 29, 2016.

Neville is one of several FAA registered drone operators in the Wilmington area gearing their drone companies toward a variety of industries including real estate, construction and government.

"You have a 3-D dynamic now. You can do things with these drones that you can't do with any other camera," Neville said. "You can get a drone on site for less money and less man power. Eventually you'll see a lot more people gravitating toward using aerial footage."

Students in Neville's very first drone course that started this month at CFCC are joining in. Not only are they seeking to learn federal regulations and safe operation, but many are interested in commercial use, he said.

Dylan Lee, spokesman for the city of Wilmington, is one of two city employees taking Neville's course for commercial use. In June, the city purchased a DJI Phantom 4 Pro drone for \$1,799 with funds from the city's communications budget, he said.

The costs for commercial drones can reach upwards of \$5,000 depending on the model.

Once employees pass FAA testing, the city can get the drone up and running. But the city does not have a timeline yet for its operation, Lee said.

“We expect there’s going to be myriad of uses,” Lee said of the drone.

The city aims to use its drone in a variety of scenarios including assessing storm damage, monitoring traffic flow and tracking and highlighting progress on construction at sites such as River Place, North Waterfront Park and the city’s transportation bond projects.

“We see its effectiveness ... particularly in our ability to help show off our assets as a city,” Lee said. “We recognize that a more operational function would also benefit the city.”

Like the city, more companies are gravitating toward commercial use of drones in video footage and photos for their websites, marketing and social media.



Sean McGovern, broker, Realtor and owner of the McGovern Group at Keller Williams Realty, described drone technology as “taking real estate to the next level.”

Several agents in the Wilmington market are taking advantage of drone photos and video footage for listings, he said.

“You can get more things from the air that you wouldn’t get from a terrestrial photo,” McGovern said. “It really takes a listing to the next level, and you are seeing a totally different perspective.”

With drone technology, clients, especially those from out of town, can become more knowledgeable homebuyers, he said.

“I think it’s going to become an industry standard,” McGovern said. “Nowadays more and more agents are going to utilize drone photos and video to showcase the home, the neighborhood, the amenities of the neighborhood and surrounding areas.”

Jim Hundley, vice president of business development and marketing at Thomas Construction Group, said drones have given the company more flexibility than traditional site cameras.

“We will continue to explore the use of drones where beneficial,” Hundley said. “I think that drones and other methods of site cameras really help analyze conditions in the field, and their use will continue to expand.”

Peter Newman, owner of Aerial Images ILM, left his day job in mortgage banking to start his business.

“I never looked back,” he said. “It was a cool hobby that turned occupation.”

Examples Of Commerical Drone Use

Agriculture: crop mapping, irrigation/ hydration analysis

Insurance: using UAS photography/ data for claims adjustment

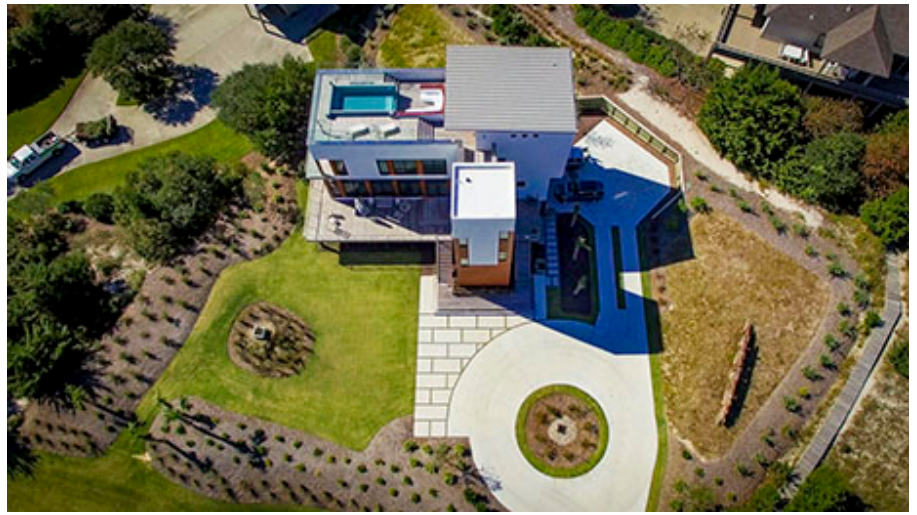
Infrastructure: inspections of roads, bridges, construction

Energy: inspections of utility lines, wind and solar power installations

Package delivery: “Amazon is serious. They’re doing this.”

Source: Peter Newman, Aerial Images ILM

Above photo: Drone photos are being used in construction and real estate, like this photo of a Tongue & Groove-built home on Figure Eight Island. (Photo courtesy of Aerial Images ILM)



Newman said his business has expanded into areas he hadn't imagined, including precision mapping, industrial inspections and music videos. Business has been profitable for Newman, who has also worked with construction groups, developers and land management, as well as TV and film industry.

Newman utilizes a precision mapping technique using a programmed flight pattern over a plot of land while the drone takes hundreds of still photographs. The pictures are knitted together using computer software into a high-resolution image called an “orthomosaic.” Newman has used this technique for commercial development and land use.

“One of the things that has surprised me is the directions the industry has gone in, because when I started there wasn't anything called (orthomosaic),” he said. “I think what sets people apart is not just the mechanics of flying a drone, it's the artist's eye for composition and color.

“Above all, I see myself as a storyteller. I use drones to convey the client's narrative with images, video and data,” he said.

Mark Batson, owner of local design and build firm Tongue & Groove, said drone technology allows his company to interact with clients through visuals and showcase the work, which is essential to the final product.

Drone footage is critical during the planning stage to determine whether a new build site is a fit for clients, he said. While services such as Google Maps are helpful, Batson said, there have been times the information is not up to date or doesn't provide enough detail.

“Views, if they are available, are usually a first priority for homeowners, and this technology allows us to show them what those will be at a specific location,” he said. “As some of our clients are still living in a different city or state during the planning stages, this footage is great for communication.”

The builder also uses drone footage to record milestones of projects under construction that can be shared with clients, capturing exterior details from perspectives that would not otherwise be visible.

“We will continue to experiment with the drone footage,” Batson said, “to create a more enhanced experience of each product than what could be described through still pictures.”

Copyright © 2017 SAJ Media, LLC dba Greater Wilmington Business Journal

This story may be displayed, reformatted and printed for your personal, noncommercial use only and in accordance with our Terms of Service located at <http://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/useragreement>.