

Palm Bay drone park could be created in The Compound



Rick Neale, FLORIDA TODAY 3:47 p.m. EST March 11, 2016



(Photo: Malcolm Denemark, FLORIDA TODAY)

Someday, speeding drones could zip above uninhabited lands in The Compound in southwestern Palm Bay, zooming along aerial racetracks and testing engineering tweaks applied by college and high school students.

Palm Bay officials have discussed designating a drone park for use by hobbyists and the Florida Institute of Technology's unmanned aerial vehicles program, said James Marshal, the city's Bayfront Community Redevelopment Agency administrator.

"Economically, it makes sense. Academically, it makes sense. From a high-tech economic development standpoint, workforce attraction, it makes sense," Marshal said.

"And we've talked to employers like Harris — who think their employees would eat it up," he said.

The target drone park site in The Compound is roughly 30 acres of city-owned land off the south side of J.A. Bombardier Boulevard. City workers converted this property into parking areas for Tough Mudder Central Florida last November.

No drone park timeline yet exists. Marshal said the city is awaiting feedback from FIT, the Federal Aviation Administration and Brevard Multirotor, a group that races radio-controlled quadcopters at Valkaria Airport.

Drone enthusiasts already fly their machines at The Compound on an informal basis, and the Spaceport Rocketry Association launches sophisticated model rockets there as well.

"That would be an excellent location to have some sort of regional drone racing tournament, or even perhaps an East Coast drone racing opportunity," Marshal said.

He said Brevard Public Schools STEM students could field competing teams at the future drone park.

"We did an unofficial survey with Bayside High School. And we found about 50 students — pretty much at the drop of a dime — that would want to sign up really fast in a drone-racing team element," he said.

[Drone rules remain up in the air for now \(/story/news/local/2016/03/05/drone-rules-remain-air/81320868/\)](/story/news/local/2016/03/05/drone-rules-remain-air/81320868/)

On the legal front, Palm Bay leaders are exploring crafting drone regulations for inhabited areas of the city. Ed Kinberg, a lawyer with the Melbourne firm Wideman Malek Attorneys at Law, delivered a drone presentation to the Palm Bay City Council on Feb. 18.

Kinberg offered to help develop a city drone ordinance and lead an hour-long drone-law training session for the police department, free of charge.

"A 4-pound drone dropping down from 400 feet, 200 feet, is a very dangerous item. We want to make sure they're operated safely, not just in Palm Bay but also throughout Brevard County," he told council members.

"We thought this was the city to do a prototype ordinance," he said.

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Councilman Tres Holton replied that he flies a drone.

"I started with the cheap ones, because you do crash them often while you're learning. I spent a lot of time up at HobbyTown on 192 buying a lot of parts," Holton said.

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