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Following a record-breaking performance in fiscal year 2023, we've also been strengthening our connections at home to continue meeting our standards of service, speed and efficiency. Projects on the horizon or nearing completion at the Port of Wilmington include intermodal yard improvements that will enhance freight mobility and efficiency, an expanded refrigerated container yard to handle more cargo than ever before and major paving projects that will increase the overall productivity and capacity of our operations. On-port projects in Morehead City include berth improvements, crane rail extension, and new warehouse space to keep pace with the strong demand for our services.

However, there's much more on the horizon. The recent approval of our fiscal year 2024 budget will bring even more efficiencies to our gate and terminal operating systems, intermodal services, and infrastructure technologies.

But no matter how many connections we make, we must always remember the reason for building them: the continued economic prosperity of North Carolina. We look forward to working with you in support of this goal, because a thriving state is beneficial to all who live within it.



Brian E. Clark  
North Carolina State Ports Authority  
Executive Director



# GOING COASTAL

## Expanded marketing benefits New Hanover.

New Hanover is the second smallest of North Carolina's 100 counties at 191.53 square miles. But the area, which includes Wilmington, along the state's southern coast ranked seventh in visitor spending in 2022. Domestic and international visitors spent more than a billion in 2022, which represents a 13.9% increase from 2021.

Three new marketing strategies aim to keep the momentum as tourism officials want visitors to know they have friends in small places.

The Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau's Mobile Trip Guide and its Ambassador course help direct tourists to local attractions. Its out-of-state paid media campaign uses funds to target markets through a media plan using a testing scenario, according to CVB communications and public relations director Connie Nelson.

The Mobile Trip Guide allows visitors to scan a QR code and go to a website that gives them needed info. The three-hour ambassador course is free to tourism industry employees and residents who want to enhance their knowledge of the whole region to advise visitors.

CVB President and CEO Kim Huffham explains how they are testing travel from specific areas.

"We selected six key markets with lower awareness — this includes five out-of-state markets and one Western N.C. market — to receive a 'heavy up' approach of media support above the unified base media plan we do annually that also includes in-state and out-of-state targeting," says Huffham.

"These 'heavy-up' or 'variable' markets were paired with 'control' markets of a similar profile, population size and location/distance from Wilmington."

A Destination Analysis Study will measure media metrics such as click-through rates to banners (of websites), website traffic and visitor guide downloads.

In its first six months, the out-of-state campaign showed a 20% increase from 2021 in the distances visitors travel for overnight trips, at a 350-mile average. Out-of-state versus in-state travel for overnights originating from four designated marketing areas was close to 2021 (61.1% versus 60.6%). Out-of-state visitation dropped slightly from 2021

(37.7%) to 2022 (37.1%).

"It is still too early to truly see significant shift, however, the increase in miles traveled for overnight trips is the best indicator we are seeing the needle move," Huffham says.

New Hanover's CVB also has completed a partnership with Wilmington International Airport.

"The CVB completed several inbound marketing campaigns with Avelo Airlines and Sun Country to promote visitation to the area," Huffham says. "The airport visitor information desk features the new Mobile Trip Guide through promoting its QR code to better serve visitors while in market. In FY23-24 the CVB will continue to support new air service as awarded with inbound marketing and will be developing a digital destination ad placed in the airport with space compliments of the airport."

In addition to Wilmington's historic areas, riverfront and performing arts venues, popular destinations include the oceanfront towns of Wrightsville Beach, Carolina Beach and Kure Beach.

"The Mobile Trip Guide is a web-based, mobile-first guide designed to enhance the in-market visitor experience," Nelson says. "The location-based functionality allows

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Whalehead, a 1920s estate in Historic Corolla Park, hosts a Christmas Crafts Village, with candlelight tours on Fridays.

visitors to find hotels, attractions, restaurants, shops and events near them more easily, or they can search by type of restaurant, hotel, activity, etcetera.

"Visitors are able to save partner businesses to an itinerary, share them via text message or social media or contact the partner directly from the contact information saved directly in the site."

Nelson says QR code cards, table tents, placards and window clings promoting the Mobile guide have been distributed throughout New Hanover for travel businesses to share with visitors for easy access to the website guide.

"One thing that sets the Wilmington mobile trip guide apart is that it is web-based and there's no app download required," Nelson says.

Tourism in New Hanover creates 6,142 jobs and contributes \$73 million to the state and local tax bases, according to Wilmington and Beaches CVB.

The three-hour Wilmington and Beaches Ambassador course is primarily designed for local travel partners and visitor-facing hospitality employees, including the CVB staff.

"Local residents who wish to become destination ambassadors are also welcome to enroll in the course. In fact, a local realtor recently inquired about enrolling in the course, which is great," Nelson says.

"The course launched just as the summer travel season kicked off. During the winter months, we hope to see enrollment pick up again."

The free, online Ambassador course is a professional development course in which employees apply what they learn to

their current jobs in lodging, restaurants, attractions, tour companies or event venues.

"At the end of the course, a certificate of completion can be printed and displayed for all to see," Nelson says.

"The ultimate goal of the course is to enhance the visitor experience by expanding employees' destination knowledge and experience using the CVB's visitor information tools. Other lessons are devoted to best practices in providing excellent customer service and gaining a better understanding of the role that tourism ambassadors play in New Hanover County."

Overall, North Carolina hauled in \$33.3 billion statewide in 2022 from domestic and international visitors, a 15.2% increase from 2021 and 14% higher than the record \$29.22 billion set in 2019.

Much of that is spent along the state's 325 miles of coastline.

The N.C. Department of Commerce reports the Outer Banks — barrier islands from the Virginia line 120 miles south to Ocracoke — saw a 67.2% increase in occupancy collections between 2019 and 2021.

Rental prices are down in the fall, and fishing and bird-watching — at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge — is in.

History fans can visit the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum, Fort Raleigh National Historic Site, Dare County Regional Airport Museum and Freedmen's Colony of Roanoke Island.

"There's no way we can forget to mention our beautiful wild Spanish mustangs," says Visit Currituck spokesperson Michele Ellis. "They are one of the biggest draws for our part of the Outer Banks. You can take a horse tour to see them with one of our amazing horse-tour companies."

The Currituck County Rural Center in Powells Point hosts a Bulls & BBQ on November 4 with a craft market, mechanical bull, "Mutton Bustin" rodeo event for young children and barbecue tasting contest. On November 24, Whalehead, a 1920s estate in Historic Corolla Park, hosts a Christmas Crafts Village, with candlelight tours on Fridays and Saturdays.

### WANT A SELF-GUIDED TOUR?

"If your vehicle is four-wheel-drive," Ellis says, "then you are able to drive on our beach yourself. Just don't forget to let some of the air out of your tires."

In Carteret County on the Crystal Coast — where Shackelford Banks horses, Cape Lookout Lighthouse and Old Fort Macon are big draws — tourism's annual economic impact is near \$325 million, according to the Chamber of Commerce, with more than \$57 million in payroll for tourism industry employees.

The 85 miles of Crystal Coast coastline known as the Southern Outer Banks includes Morehead City and oceanfront towns of Emerald Isle, Indian Beach, Atlantic Beach, Beaufort, Cape Lookout, Harker's Island and Pine Knoll Shores, home of the N.C. Aquarium, with several marine species and a sea turtle nursery.



1940s postcard for Carolina Beach in southeastern North Carolina.



4129 Endurance Trail, Riverlights \$539,000



1910 Colleton Court, Drayton Square \$550,000



1080 Saint Joseph Street 5B, Carolina Beach \$559,000



208 Grayhawk Circle, Porters Neck \$799,000



1001 Trout Lane Unit A, Kure Beach \$750,000



2017 Graywalsh Drive, Landfall \$1,100,000



1463 Quadrant Circle, Landfall \$1,395,000



2113 Harborway Drive, Landfall \$1,625,000



2420 Morgans Ridge SE, Bolivia \$2,690,000



6358 Myrtle Grove Road, Myrtle Grove \$3,985,000



2709 Middle Sound Loop Rd, Middle Sound \$3,995,000



1-4 Captain Charles Trail, Bald Head Island \$6,900,000

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Fall and winter events include Fall Party and a Kindergarten Thanksgiving at the Beaufort Historic Site and Carolina Chocolate Festival in Morehead City.

Further inland, Moore County's Pinehurst Resort will host the 2024 U.S. Open golf tournament in June 2024, and county leaders are urging visitors to book accommodations and buy tickets early. The World Golf Hall of Fame is relocating next year from St. Augustine, Fla., to Golf House Pinehurst. In nearby Carthage, Southern Pines Brewing Company has purchased the historic Tyson and Jones Buggy Factory

and will open a two-story restaurant and brewery in the spring.

This winter, the Pinehurst-Southern Pines-Aberdeen Area CVB is partnering with the Aberdeen, Carolina and Western Railroad to promote the inaugural Carolina Christmas Train — a local 'Polar Express.'

### WHAT'S POPULAR IN NEW HANOVER?

The vintage **Carolina Beach** boardwalk with oceanfront amusement park and Ferris wheel.

**Wrightsville Beach**, one of National Geographic's top surfing towns in the world.

**Kure Beach**, the oldest fishing pier on the Atlantic Coast and a Civil War fort, home of the largest land-sea battle of the Civil War.

The **Wilmington Riverwalk** area with 30 public-use boat slips, Battleship North Carolina tours, 230-block National Register Historic District, parks, gardens, museums and performing arts venues.

*"Business owners and local residents are often asked by visitors, friends and family who live in other areas about what there is to see and do in Wilmington," Nelson says. "As our industry and local residents become more familiar with what we have to offer, and learn more about how visitors help create a desirable quality of place, we hope to create an even more welcoming environment for those visitors." ■*



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# FROM SOIL TO SKY

Educational partnerships and a focus on drones create jobs across the East's 29 counties.

**T**he NC East Alliance economic development organization is initiating a homegrown approach through educational resources to create a continual, skilled workforce in its 29 Coastal Plain counties.

STEM East connects school district faculties and superintendents, and leadership of 10 community colleges, with employers for careers that utilize science, technology, engineering and math.

"NC East is the only regional economic development organization focusing on our 13,000 teachers in 29 counties as a workforce," says Vann Rogerson, the Alliance's president and CEO.

The Alliance's Industry in Schools career clusters for FY 2023–2024 will train teachers and faculty through public-private partnerships so they can educate students in career-specific pathways.

California-based BelleJAR Foundation has pledged \$1.6 million to help. The Alliance received the first of four annual checks — \$400,000 — last summer from the foundation, which seeks "unique and innovative approaches to improve educational outcomes for underserved students," according to its website.

Industry in Schools "provides an opportunity for teachers to engage with regional industry to design instructional programming and classroom activities that align with curriculum standards," according to the STEM East website.

While funding for Industry in Schools remains an agenda item with the

legislature, some events are taking place.

"We're coming together to solve workforce issues in the region," says Trey Goodson, the Alliance's regional economic developer and director of marketing and communications. "Some areas are health science, aviation sciences, agriculture, advanced manufacturing, the blue economy of boat building, marine trades, tourism and renewables and alternative energies."

Last summer, NE East Alliance hosted workshops in Health Sciences, at Pitt Community College; Aviation Science, at Craven Community College; and Smart Agriculture, at James Sprunt Community College in Kenansville.

While other announcements are forthcoming, Goodson says, "Through these programs, we help teachers learn about these job opportunities and training opportunities for their students to pursue some long-term careers in eastern North Carolina that people may not be aware of."

One area with multiple jobs is agriculture.

Gary Roberson is a distinguished professor and cooperative extension specialist in the Biological and Agricultural Engineering Department at N.C. State. North Carolina has 8.4 million acres of farmland and leads the country in tobacco and sweet potato production. Agriculture contributes about \$76 billion to the state economy.

"I have worked with the STEM East program. Agriculture is changing. It is no

longer a business where you can learn all you need to know by just listening to your parents or neighbors," Roberson says.

"The modern farmer is part businessman, entrepreneur, crop and soil scientist, machinery technician, personnel manager and marketing specialist. The list could go on and on. We need to increase our productivity in order to continue to meet the demands of a growing world. At the same time, we need to be good stewards of our resources for efficient production. This will require a well-prepared farm community and a well-prepared support community. Farmers will need support services they can depend on to keep modern machinery running at peak efficiency. The demands and opportunities for a local workforce are certainly there."

Beaufort County on the banks of the Pamlico River also sees "demands and opportunities," with incoming industries and an undertaking at its Washington-Warren Airport that will have ripple effects throughout the territory of the NCEast Alliance works with.

"All of what makes North Carolina great is on display here in Beaufort County, where we add in a top-notch quality of life with a coastal/river environment and small town feel that is just 25 minutes from Greenville and less than two hours to Raleigh," says Brad Hufford, director of Beaufort County Economic Development.

"Companies are discovering that there is great opportunity here, such

as BTW Global, which relocated here recently as well as Elite Truck which is investing in a new headquarters in downtown Washington and scaling up their workforce. We anticipate additional announcements in the next few months that will further solidify Beaufort County as a top-tier location for economic development in Eastern North Carolina.”

One field ripe with opportunities recently landed at Beaufort County’s airport.

## THE DRONE FRONTIER

Drones are the latest addition to join Washington-Warren’s 5,000-foot active runway, 5,000-foot crosswind runway, five conventional and five t-hangar complexes, 39-acre solar farm and a terminal building with rocking-chair front porch, dedicated in 2015.

“There are 72 airports in North Carolina, and 62 that are general aviation like ours, so we’ve been operating at a loss for as long as anyone can remember,” says airport director Earl Malpass. “So, I’ve been trying to put some things in place that would help us to, one, be self-sufficient and, two, provide jobs to Washington and Beaufort County. So, what’s our niche? What’s surrounding us?”

“We started looking into the future. North Carolina is known as First in Flight and is third or fourth in the nation in the aerospace business, so looking at what I believe is the next frontier in aviation is drone operation.”

Xelevate Unmanned Systems of Excellence, an Unmanned Aircraft Systems [drone] testing, development and training center in Leesburg, Va., partnered with Washington-Warren in August 2022 to make it the first “Drone Smart” airport on the East Coast — a commercial location for unmanned flight operations.”

“Forever First in Flight is the term we’re using,” Malpass says. “It’s important that everyone understands that Washington is not becoming a ‘drone airport,’ but an airport that has integrated drone use.”

Xelevate’s presence is expected to impact many factors of coastal life.

“Creating a workforce to complement the drone industry will be a long-term effort and include not only Beaufort Public Schools, Beaufort County Community College but East Carolina University as well,” Hufford says.

“Xelevate’s partnership has helped draw attention to Beaufort County and the

unique value proposition that we have here. [We] exemplify all the great characteristics that have made the state of North Carolina a consistent and recognized leader in economic development.”

He mentioned several ways the state is ripe for new technology and new businesses

“Our strategic location at the midpoint of the eastern seaboard, where a large percentage of the U.S. population is within a day’s drive, a competitive tax environment and low cost of doing business, as well as support from the community college and university system make our state the envy of most.”

“We plan to partner with companies like Xelevate to grow a local, homegrown workforce in adjoining counties,” Rogerson says. “When companies come to Beaufort County for testing, manufacturing and software development, NCEast’s STEM Industry in Schools Regional Team will partner and grow local workers for the company’s future multi-county labor shed. We look forward to supporting Xelevate’s development and growth in our NCEast region.”

Marcy Eisenberg is president and co-founder of Xelevate, a company

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Elizabeth City State University is actively involved in drone research.

created “because we saw a gap in the industry of unmanned systems,” she says. “About 80% of the market is foreign-owned.

“From a national security standpoint, we need to have American-made, born-in-the-USA technologies, so we created Xelevate for aviation, national security, workforce development and education all wrapped into one.”

Think First in Flight on caffeine.

“This whole market has been like drinking from a firehose; it’s moving so incredibly fast,” Eisenberg says.

“Obviously the defense market has a big interest in this, but because drones can be a fraction of the cost and solve complex issues we haven’t seen in the past, you see commercial markets starting to use them. Real estate, insurance, agriculture — these are starting to use drones in their business clusters in the area.”

Roberson emphasizes UAV [unmanned aviation vehicle] importance in agriculture. (The term UAV refers to the vehicle alone, whereas UAS includes ground control and communications units.)

“The UAV is flown over the field and captures images of the entire field. These images are stitched together to form a composite image, which is then analyzed to tell us something about the crops’ health or status,” he says.

“Images are captured with either an RGB (red, green and blue wavelength) camera, the same type of camera in a cell phone, or a multispectral camera which can also include near infrared or red edge bands. The imagery, after processing, can be used to estimate plant stands, plant

biomass, health or vigor, track weed populations or look for plant stress, such as insects, disease, drought or other factors.”

Last April, a workshop called Drones On The Farm — Introduction To Drones In Agriculture was presented by the Vance County 4-H for high school students. N.C. State has hosted sessions explaining drone use for pesticides and crop monitoring and in a study that started in 2021 and ends in January is evaluating drone use for management decisions in soybean production.

Then, there’s weather.

“Part of the reason we wanted to be engrained in North Carolina is the hurricane response teams,” Eisenberg says. “N.C. DOT can use drones to fly radios over distraught areas and have conversations with people. They can use drones to start delivering water and medicines and things of that nature. The best part of drones is they are the next flying cell phone.”

Washington-Warren received \$20 million in state funding last year for a new landing system, runways and taxiways. Upgrades could generate about 1,000 jobs in contract work, and the aerospace and marine industries.

The first \$10 million payment was in January 2022 and the second in October 2022. The airport purchased an adjacent 107 acres for an aerospace industrial park; added water, sewer and electricity at a new corporate jetport and mapped plans for future hangars. Lights were added to the runways.

Further modernization, Malpass says, include adding fiber and a 5G antenna,

“so companies can send data where they need to, securely. An additional project is we’re the first and only general aviation airport with drone detection service. Verus Technology Group partnered with us and installed a drone detection system so pilots can detect drones within two miles.

“We purchased LiDAR wind detection system, which monitors from three feet to 1,000 feet, and that’s important because the drone customers want to know if the winds are more critical at a certain altitude. We’re only the fifth airport in the nation using LiDAR.”

Eisenberg says Xelevate is exploring working with Hyde and Dare Counties and the N.C. Department of Transportation in DFR (drone as a first responder) and the FAA’s Beyond Visual Line of Sight applications.

A few years ago, Eisenberg says, Xelevate conducted a test flight over Ocracoke that lasted 20 minutes. The drone carried bottled water.

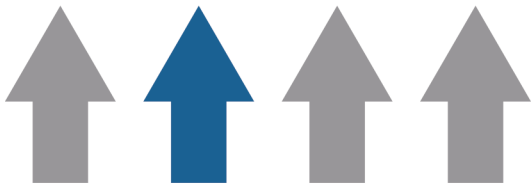
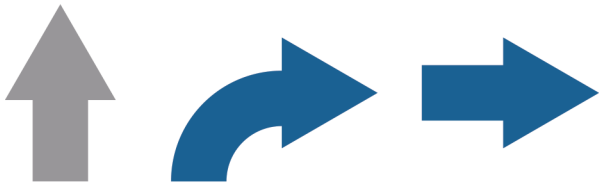
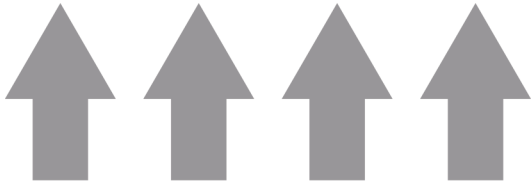
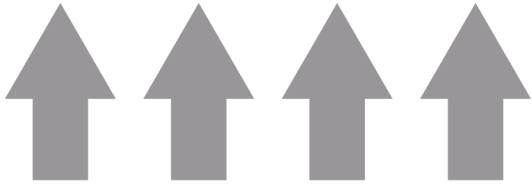
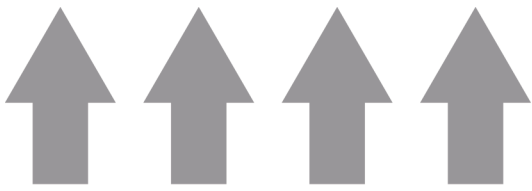
“Essentially it was a DFR, and it can become part of an emergency response team,” she says. “We are working with Hyde County to potentially utilize some of that area for additional innovation work. This is a regional initiative, not just at the airport. The airport is Ground Zero. North Carolina was First in Flight and it will be First in Flight, forever.”

In mid-August, the NCDOT received a first-of-its-kind waiver from the FAA “to remotely launch and fly drones beyond the pilot’s visual line of sight for construction project inspections,” according to a NCDOT release. “NCDOT Division of Aviation is piloting the use of docked drones with the private firm.

Skydio, a San Mateo, California-based company, is part of the Beyond Visual program. And NCDOT is one of eight U.S. teams testing and demonstrating how drones can be safely used for business and government purposes to inform the Federal Aviation Administration’s regulation of these rapidly advancing technologies.”

One facet of Beyond is community engagement or collecting, analyzing and addressing community concerns.

“The imagery lets you see from a disaster perspective,” Eisenberg says.



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## DRONE EDUCATION SUPPORTS A GROWING INDUSTRY

In addition to aviation curriculum in Beaufort schools, Elizabeth City State University's bachelor's degree program in Unmanned Aircraft Systems began in fall 2019. The university also offers a bachelor's in Aviation Science with a concentration in UAS.

"Many students in the aviation program take courses offered in the UAS program as their electives," says Dr. Chandra Asthana, UAS program coordinator and associate professor. ECSU has since introduced a minor in UAS and certificate in UAS.

"ECSU has a strong partnership with Wake Tech for drone training to provide education, training, workforce development, outreach and applied research," Asthana says. "A reality-based simulation center for Basic Law Enforcement Training, including a driver training track and a 4D immersive training village will come up soon.

This facility will become the new home of Wake Tech's EMS program and a new program in Unmanned Aircraft Systems."

He says the school also is working with a NASA workforce development grant and since 2019 has engaged in summer programs "to provide educational experiences to school children."

In the future, he says, "We are going

to have a bigger building for the aviation and emergency management department that will have more space for UAS labs and lecture rooms. We have many virtual simulation facilities for UAS. In addition, we have a variety of drones that students have hands-on experience with. Some of them are flown with remote controllers while some of them are flown in automated mode for which students make mission plans before launching them in the field.

"The expectation is to have multidirectional growth of UAS program providing many opportunities to the students for employment as well as starting up businesses of their own."

Xelevate's Eisenberg says the company will also collaborate with the schools.

"With NC East, the goal is to strategically partner with them," Eisenberg says. "With schools, we're partnering with how to build UAVs, do the software, do the body, flight operations. These are going to allow Eastern North Carolina to plug in a new way to help this market. Start the students young, have them introduced to aviation science early and computer science, and they'll learn the concepts as they go through school. At Xelevate, we don't build the drones; we help people. It's an emerging market, the supply is out there and people in the communities can find ways to plug in."

## HELP IS IN THE AIR

"This is what we're doing here: We're here so we can forge into the future with an initiative of policy and technology and provide the consulting to minimize risk and maximize innovation," Eisenberger says. "That's why we're at the airport, to continue to build in this emerging market."

The airport is hosting a Drone Technology and Air Show on Oct. 13 and 14.

Hufford says new companies are one ingredient in pushing Eastern North Carolina forward. But there are others.

"I think the biggest challenges we have in Eastern North Carolina are to reverse the population trends that have seen population diminish in the east while communities in the Triangle, Charlotte region and Triad have experienced explosive growth the last few years," he says. "I think North Carolina needs to balance growth to all parts of the state, and there is no better place to do that than in Eastern North Carolina. To do that, investments need to be made in infrastructure like roads and utilities, affordable housing options and economic development sites and buildings.

"I think the biggest goal is to grow in relation to the state's overall growth numbers. If we can begin to attract new companies at the size and scale that the Piedmont has, then we will see population growth and help develop communities that to date have seen decline and reduction in residents. I have always contended that our region suffers from a branding and marketing challenge. Too many people only know us through East Carolina University and vacations at the coast, but there is so much more. There are homegrown entrepreneurs doing incredible things. We have diverse communities and a growing Latino population as well as many retirees from all over the country that have discovered places like Washington, Belhaven and Chocowinity. If the Eastern N.C. counties and political leadership came together and worked toward a common goal, I think we can be the next region that gets the attention of businesses as well as relocating workers." ■



ECSU now has a mobile drone lab, taking its highly lauded unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) degree program curriculum into the field, and providing students with more hands-on experience in one of the fastest growing career fields in the country.



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