THE FUTURE IS HERE: STUDENT DRONE INNOVATORS TAKE THE CONTROLS AT TECH PORT

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The Dee Howard Foundation's drone competition brought together middle and high school students from across the region to design, build, and fly their own aircraft.

Hundreds of students from across the region brought their engineering skills, creativity, and competitive spirit to the Boeing Center at Tech Port Nov. 15 for the Dee Howard Foundation's annual student drone competition.

The event showcased months of learning in engineering, coding, and flight operations. It also demonstrates why Port San Antonio is making a significant investment in Dee Howard Foundation initiatives: the foundation's work both strengthens our educational mission and aligns with the Port's effort to advance the adoption of next-generation air mobility, from industrial drones to "air taxis" that could serve as everyday transportation for commuters.

The competition is a project-based learning opportunity for students who are part of a hands-on drone curriculum, which teaches middle and high school students to assemble and repair aircraft, design airframes, program autonomous flight, and understand safety, regulation, and ethics.

Many go on to earn FAA credentials that open the door to commercial drone work.

"The drone competition is more than an event," said DHF Executive Director Christopher Mammen. "It's a bridge between what students learn in school and the industries that will define their future. Through these experiential learning opportunities, we're helping students see themselves in the technologies shaping the future of aerospace and other related industries."

That future is arriving quickly. Just two days after students competed at the Boeing Center, Amazon—one of the competition's other major sponsors—launched "same hour" drone delivery service in San Antonio, demonstrating how autonomous aerial systems are poised to become an everyday part of logistics operations.

That milestone reinforces what students experienced during the competition, whose theme was "Eyes in the Aisles" with a focus on warehouse operations and

logistics: drones are no longer experimental tools. They have become essential to how goods move, how warehouses work, and how industries innovate.

Commercial growth reflects the same trajectory. The global commercial drone market is valued at nearly $30 billion today and is projected to exceed $54 billion by 2030. The drone logistics and transportation sector is expanding close to 50 percent per year, and by the end of the decade, 85 percent of warehouse operators expect to rely on drones for routine inspection and inventory. These are not abstract trends—they are real workforce demands and real opportunity for San Antonio students.

For Port San Antonio, the maturing drone industry represents the future promise of fully developed advanced air mobility (AAM) systems.

As the Port continues to develop a purpose-built vertiport on the Tech Port campus and work with industry and government partners to test electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) technologies, the need for local talent with hands-on experience becomes increasingly critical.

Local students who learned to build and fly drones are developing the same competencies—autonomous systems, maintenance, logistics integration, and aerial operations—that will underpin tomorrow's AAM ecosystem.

"Advanced air mobility isn't theoretical—it's already taking shape, and our region needs to be ready," said Port San Antonio President and CEO Jim Perschbach.

"Our 1,900-acre campus, our close coordination with Kelly Field, and our history supporting major aviation operations make this an ideal place for companies to test and validate next-generation aircraft. As we build a purpose-designed vertiport and expand our research campus, programs like the Dee Howard Foundation's drone competition help ensure we have the talent ready to support this new era of flight."

Photo credits: Scott Ball