

# Drone conference shows that unmanned aerial vehicles interest is taking off

## Realtors' association mulls making it an annual event

### Guest Writer

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Tom McArthur

The site of the first enterprise drone conference in the Northwest? Spokane. The first local Association of Realtors in the U.S. to convene a drone conference? Spokane's. The first city in Washington state to deploy drones in a public safety role? Spokane.

Also consider that all five sharks on the ABC-TV program "Shark Tank" bit for the first time on a startup drone company in Coeur d'Alene—xCraft Enterprises LLC—and that hobby drones flew inside a Spokane Public Facilities District building for the first time at a Realtors' conference.

While many cities and enterprises are wringing their hands with myriad concerns about drones, supporters in the Spokane-Coeur d'Alene market are figuring it out and publicly looking up with relish at the future of drone technology and all that comes with it.

Among these firsts, I am proudest of the fact that the Spokane Association of Realtors is the first real estate association in the country to convene a drone conference—sponsored by our state association, Washington Realtors—because that was my idea.

Aircraft without onboard pilots go by several names: unmanned aircraft system, or UAS for short; unmanned aerial vehicle, or UAV; or, simply, drones. One of the other acronyms you'll hear is FPV, which is short for First Person View. It refers to the fact that video cameras are mounted to the drones and transmit live video to the pilot on the ground to provide a screen image as though the pilot was onboard the tiny aircraft. The ability to record and disseminate video from all of these platforms is what gives the technology such huge commercialization potential.

More than 770,000 civilian drones are registered in the U.S. today. Most early drones are novelties or toys. Then, in August last year, the FAA made it legal to fly drones for commercial purposes in U.S. airspace. That's when many enterprises started to look at them as serious business tools.

Joseph Williams, Governor Jay Inslee's point person on drones with the state Department of Commerce, was one of the speakers at the "HomeDrone: Enterprise Drone Conference & Expo" that was held last month at the Spokane Convention Center and that I organized. It attracted about 150 Realtor, public service, and private sector attendees.

Williams says, “I was very encouraged by the young people I met there who are currently pushing the envelope for drones. The drone racers are innovating like crazy but not thinking yet of how to monetize their innovations. When that transition happens (as it did for the original aviators and, more recently, for things like snowboards) we want the state to be ready to help them develop their ideas and their business models.”

I am new to the Spokane Association of Realtors, hired as public affairs director just last summer. However, I have a 30-year record of success convening important conversations in the Inland Northwest: as a news reporter and anchor at KREM-TV, as press secretary to U.S. Rep. George Nethercutt, and as communications director and historian for the Davenport Hotel.

A year or two ago, our Realtor members were beginning to experiment with drones to acquire aerial video of properties for their clients. It was becoming the rage. One broker told me that if he put video on a listing, as opposed to still photographs, he saw a 300 percent increase in clicks—and incrementally more if it was drone video.

It struck me that any drone video of a property for sale was, necessarily, a commercial purpose—specifically disallowed by federal law, at the time. As my drone conversations grew to include friends and associates, it became clear that this was how most enterprises were approaching the use of drones for commercial video work. We’re not really selling the video, so that makes us a hobbyist, and the law says, then, we can fly.

With the drone conference, our desire as an association was to convene an event to provide guidance on best practices, and invite our colleagues and associates to join us. I wrote out the concept of the drone conference here with a budget worksheet and a list of prospective partners.

The Spokane association’s communications/member services committee unanimously approved the project early this year, and the full board then also OK’d it.

The conference offered guest speakers, panel discussions, and classroom sessions. It also included vendors representing the Federal Aviation Administration, Washington State Department of Commerce, Northwest Flight School, Gonzaga University School of Business, Lee & Hayes intellectual property law firm, and a number of aerial imaging companies. Hobbyists flew drone races in an indoor arena throughout the day—a first for the Spokane Convention Center.

Robert Ticknor, FAA Safety Team Program manager based at Spokane Felts Field and an expo exhibitor, says, “As the educational branch of the FAA, the FAA Safety Team is committed to serving the aviation community by conveying safety principles and practices through training, outreach, and education.”

He says the drone conference was an excellent opportunity to establish relationships within the drone community while offering FAA guidance and resources.

Rob Miller, photographer/videographer with Spokane Drone Photography and who was a conference speaker and expo exhibitor, says, "I learned a lot from other industry leaders and our team was able to help educate the audience on safe and effective commercial drone operation. As a result of the event I have been able to solidify new and existing business relationships and position my company as a leader for commercial drone operation in the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene market."

Scott Stone, co-founder and pilot with FlightLogic, a conference video producer and expo exhibitor, says, "We were honored to be a part of it. It was a real treat for drone operators, Realtors and others interested in using drones for commercial use to be able to collaborate and hear from some of the industry leaders. As a commercial drone operator, it was very helpful to have the opportunity to sit down one-on-one with representatives from the FAA. I look forward to being a part of this conference again in the future."

Spokane Association of Realtors Executive Rob Higgins says, "This was a terrific event all-around. We brought a new tool to the attention of our members—and how to use it safely and legally sparked many community conversations around drones that hadn't really started before, and built relationships with partners we likely would not have otherwise met. I'm just thrilled this took off so well."

Echoing Rob's assessment, the most valuable benefit in my eyes was the number of conversations kindled by this event. People, who didn't know each other before the conference and who might never meet otherwise now have larger networks of contacts in this fascinating new aerial arena. That can only mean good things for all of us.

Earlier this month, the Spokane Fire Department began training pilots for its new fleet of three drones—making ours the first municipal fire department in the state to begin using them. The Spokane City Council gave the department approval last year for specific incident-related flights, and recently approved the grant funding that allowed for the purchase of the equipment.

"UAV technology allows us to improve the level of safety for the responders and the public during the most complex incidents," says Brian Schaeffer, the department's interim chief.

Williams, the state Department of Commerce representative, says, "Spokane has many of the right elements to carve out its own market niche in the drone industry; a confluence of the right parties could drive innovations in the use of drones in first response, infrastructure inspection, and agriculture. It will be interesting to see if Spokane has some folks who want to develop these possibilities."

A second-annual drone conference and expo is under consideration.

The conference exceeded my expectations and I am proud we: 1) exposed our members to the capability and potential of aerial video in a real estate business; 2) strengthened our association with conversation bridges that hadn't existed before; and 3) gave us courage to try new things again after a long and painful recession.

This spring, we have one more reason to say real estate is looking up.

*Tom McArthur is the director of communications and public affairs for the Spokane Association of Realtors.*

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