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Unmanned planes endorsed by TEDA

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HOUMA -- The Terrebonne Economic Development Authority has joined efforts to help the Houma-Terrebonne airport get access to cutting-edge unmanned aircraft technology.

The development board voted unanimously Wednesday to endorse the airport's attempt to get authorization from the Federal Aviation Administration to fly the aircraft out of Houma.

The Airport Commission already has a similar endorsement from Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

The FAA has to approve before the airport can even hold a demonstration of the aircraft, which is a necessary step to get permanent authorization.

The unmanned-aircraft technology was developed by the military for reconnaissance but has numerous civilian applications, from homeland security to coastal-erosion studies. The aircraft are capable of taking complex photographs that can be transferred back to the operator electronically.

TEDA's resolution states the aircraft would be useful to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's efforts to secure the region's oil-and-gas infrastructure. It could also be used for coastal-restoration studies and to track migratory patterns of endangered species, among other benefits, the resolution says.

If the airport gets access to the technology, it could justify Houma's participation in the Louisiana Optical Network Initiative, or LONI.

Access to LONI, along with access to the unmanned-aircraft technology, could attract high-tech companies to the region, supporters say.

The Airport Commission has set aside 164 acres for companies that officials hope would want to fly the unmanned planes out of Houma, according to Earl Hicks, the

commission's director of planning and development.

Also Wednesday, the development authority heard a presentation from K Partners about the two hotels it wants to build next to the Civic Center.

The San Antonio-based company, which says it has opened 11 hotels with 20 more on the way, wants to build a Springhill Suites and either a Hilton Garden Inn or a Courtyard by Marriot on six acres of parish-owned land.

The two hotels would have about 200 rooms combined and would cater to visitors who are "willing to pay for a nicer product" than is widely available in Houma, the representative said.

The company would likely build both at the same time, although that hasn't been decided for sure.

The Parish Council addressed the issue at its last meeting but put off making a decision to sell. Part of the property has already been offered to another group that plans to build Wild in the Wetlands, an interactive wetlands-themed museum.

The company is committed to the market and is willing to wait for the parish council to make a decision, they said.

However, if and when the deal is made, the company will have a third-party consultant conduct a 120-day study to make sure the deal is economically feasible.

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