

View from a Drone: AU students work to make drone flight useful for Southern Tier farming

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The view above Jericho Hill

The Saxon Fly website describes the Alfred University student group as “ a collaboration of both a drone club for fun and a legitimate drone-related business” with “big plans for the future.”

Those plans include a grant proposal submitted to the Appalachian Regional Commission for the training of Alfred University and business students to fly and repair drones and to develop the capacity to store and interpret data collected by a drone. Luis Rodriguez, Assistant Professor of Law/Taxation at Alfred University, submitted the application June 15 to Southern Tier West Regional Planning and Development Board, in Salamanca, N.Y., and ARC with the assistance of Dean Nancy Evangelista of the College of Professional Studies.

Don't expect squadrons of drones flying over Alfred anytime soon. Jason St. John, an Alfred University Finance major and the newly elected president of Saxon Fly, notes commercial drone pilots need a license in order to operate a drone.

St. John says he's optimistic, however. A rising senior, he hopes to use the 2017-18 academic year to expand Saxon Fly membership from about 10 students to 20-25, and continue developing the club's marketing studies in order to provide drone-based data collection services to Southern Tier farms.

“We've researched the local area to assess interest among local farmers for drone surveys of their land,” he says. So far, local farmers have expressed an interest in using drones to survey their lands for the purposes of irrigation and fertilizing. St. John wants to survey a larger area, pushing further into Allegany County.

He also notes Saxon Fly is more than a group of entrepreneurial business students. The club is a meeting place for students from both Alfred University's Business and Engineering schools.

Engineering students became more actively involved in the project during the 2016-17 academic year, as Saxon Fly worked on building and maintaining a drone and flying it over Jericho Hill. Alfred University Professor Mechanical Engineer Seong-Jin Lee notes the project requires the skills of students with expertise both in robotics and mechanical engineering. Economics Professor Sangjoon Lee, and Professors Seong-Jin Lee and Luis Rodriguez have been faculty advisors to Saxon Fly since 2015.

From St. John's perspective, the project is an opportunity to exercise the skills of entrepreneurship. "Our main purpose is to gain entrepreneurial experience," he says. "This is a way to get real world experience."

Rodriguez adds, "I'm always telling my student, 'Eventually, you have to work with engineers,&'"