NEWS

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Plan for Amazon delivery drones draws mixed reactions

BY GRETA GARRISON AND ALIZA SHYOVITZ
CONTRIBUTING REPORTERS



GRETA GARRISON / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

As Connecticut reviews a proposal to run an Amazon Prime Air drone program from an existing North Haven warehouse, some of the town's residents voiced concerns about security and noise, while others said the program would represent technological progress.

According to a Notice of Coastal Consistency Review published by the department, the FAA submitted a request to review the proposal to operate a drone delivery center out of an existing Amazon warehouse in North Haven.

The drone delivery would cover a 7.5-mile radius from the facility, a range that includes parts of New Haven.

The measure would approve a maximum of 1,000 drone flights per day, 365 days per year, with delivery operations taking place from 6 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.

The department's public comment period, which lasted for two weeks in September, is now closed.

Prior to seeking approval from the FAA, Amazon received unanimous approval from the North Haven Planning and Zoning Commission to operate Amazon Prime Air out of the North Haven warehouse, according to Government Technology, a California-based trade publication. A representative from the FAA did not respond to a request for comment.

Prime Air is a drone delivery service that currently operates in 11 locations across the United States.

According to its website, the service uses MK30 drones to deliver eligible items.

In August, Amazon announced plans to expand Prime Air and serve nearly 500 cities and towns by the end of 2026.

The service currently operates in cities in Illinois, Ohio, Texas, Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan and Nebraska.

"We're proud to be expanding Prime Air operations across the country," Jack Stelzner, an Amazon spokesperson, wrote in an email to the News. "We are committed to working with state and local officials and other stakeholders as we continue to explore operations in Connecticut."

According to CBS News, residents of one Dallas suburb where the delivery program currently operates have complained about disruptions to daily life. North Haven residents likewise reported potential concerns.

"I'd be concerned about objects falling out of the drones," John Coyne, who lives in Hamden, said.

Coyne added that he is worried about potential impacts to the local job market.

"Amazon is a big employer. I'd rather that people have jobs than robots," he said.

Powers called the program "completely unnecessary and unwanted."

"I just don't see this as being a benefit to the neighborhood," she said.

Some residents said they felt positively about the potential implementation of the drone service in their area.

"It's more convenient, I guess, just on the surface level," Sherab Gyaltsen, who lives in East Rock, said.

Jason Shaw, a Yale linguistics professor and North Haven resident, called the project "a kind of natural next progression."

"Drones are all over the place," Shaw said. "They're being mass produced. It kind of makes sense that you would use them for delivery."

Shaw added that he thinks it is worth investigating the impact a fleet of drones could have on local wildlife.

Gov. Ned Lamont SOM '80 and his Republican challenger, state Sen. Ryan Fazio, each weighed in on whether drone deliveries should be allowed in Connecticut in a Tuesday night debate.

"I think it's up to local municipalities, but I do worry about the fact that they could be congesting airspace. So, I think we ought to be very, very, very cautious about it," Lamont said. "Probably not for now."

Fazio said he thinks "we need to learn more" and work with municipal leaders.

The North Haven proposal is currently pending approval from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

Contact
GRETA GARRISON *at greta.garrison@yale.edu and*
ALIZA SHYOVITZ *at aliza.shyovitz@yale.edu.*

Group of randomized state citizens suggest property tax reforms

BY ALEX HUNGS
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

After four months of deliberation, Connecticut's first-ever citizens' assembly released a series of policy recommendations on Monday to amend the state's property tax system — including the creation of a commission that would reevaluate the tax exempt status of nonprofits like Yale.

The Connecticut Citizens Assembly on Property Taxes, which met for the first time this July, convened a group of 100 randomly-selected state residents intended to reflect Connecticut's demographic, political and geographic diversity. The group's 10 reform proposals received a required two-thirds vote of the assembly members, according to their final report.

"I think we're all more proud to be Americans and a democracy than we were prior to this process," assembly member Dawris Gomez said in a virtual press conference on Monday.

The assembly's recommendations addressed pathways to generate revenue other than property taxes, including a state-level income tax on millionaires, the distribution of restaurant and occupancy taxes to local governments and the introduction of interstate tolls.

The assembly proposed to create a commission to reevaluate nonprofits' property tax exemptions, asserting that Connecticut's largest cities are "disproportionately affected" by the presence of large tax-exempt institutions.

In a paragraph describing "barriers, tradeoffs, or adverse impacts to certain stakeholders" associated with the proposal, the report mentions that Yale's tax exemption, in particular, is written into the state constitution and that the state would have to pass legislation that "limits future exemptions for select nonprofits." The report also claims that current tax exemption policy is "broad."

Three of the assembly's 10 proposals focused on funding for Connecticut's public school systems. One proposal recommended regionalizing the state's school districts, which are currently run at the local level.

The report also called for more equitable distribution of special education funding and indexing the state's per-student education funding formula to account for inflation.

Bob Bailey, a participant in the assembly, said at the press conference that property taxes are a particularly pressing issue for Connecticut.

"Connecticut is unusual in that our local towns are entirely fueled by property taxes — it's written into our laws," Bailey said at the press conference. "Our towns can't implement their own sales taxes. They can't look at other avenues outside of that. Hartford, the capitol, controls everything else. There's not a county system for taxes either."

Assembly members said they felt the process of developing the proposals — which took place over the course of six sessions — did not feel political.

"Not once this whole time did I hear politics come into play whatsoever," Jim Farrell, a participant from East Haven, said at the press conference. "We were working as a group to deliver a final product, and these are recommendations that we want to go to the legislature. And I think that everybody did an outstanding job and should be proud of what we've done. And this is something that should be done in the future."

State Comptroller Sean Scanlon, who helped organize the assembly, committed to "bring its recommendations to a dedicated legislative hearing," according to the organization's website.

Assembly participant Elliot Weiler, who is from Westport, said at the press conference that he thinks the support from the assembly's wide array of Connecticut residents would improve the proposals' odds of becoming law.

"It's kind of hard to ignore 100 of your fellow citizens drawn from a cross-section of the state," he said. "If these ideas have been kicked down the road or were just political hot potatoes for decades, maybe our being behind it could give it a bit of new life."

Other assembly members said their participation in the project changed the way they view politics.

"The process, itself, for me was so empowering because I did not know a lot of this stuff," Carly Tuthill, an assembly participant from Northfield, said at the press conference. "And, as a new homeowner, it's very useful and I'm just so motivated to push now that I understand a lot of these words."

The assembly's six sessions included two weekend conferences in New Haven.



JIYOO NAM / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The 100-member Connecticut Citizens Assembly detailed 10 policy recommendations at a press conference on Monday. Its proposals addressed education funding, local government revenue and tax exemptions for nonprofits — including Yale.

Contact
ALEX HUNGS *at alex.hungs@yale.edu.*