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Northeast Kingdom Community Learns The Ups And Downs Of Hobby Droning

By **Caleigh CrossStaff** Writer

Members of the Northeast Kingdom community got the chance to get up close and personal with aerial drones, as well as the laws and regulations surrounding their private use, on Saturday afternoon.

The Kingdom's maker space, the Foundry, located in Lyndonville, hosted Steve Mermelstein, founder and drone photographer at Vermont Drone, for an event he hoped would be educational and eye-opening for those who attended.



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Mermelstein, who uses drones for photography and filmmaking, has been involved with model aircraft since the age of 8 years old and jumped on the quadcopter drone trend as soon as it become publicly available. For Mermelstein, the marriage of drones and photography was only natural; his background in photographic art reaches back to his sophomore year of high school. Mermelstein hosted the event to "get the word out" about hobby droning and to let local people know that there is help and a community available for those who are interested but might be hesitant to get involved.



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"I wanted to teach people how to have fun with drones responsibly," said Mermelstein.

Responsible use was a focal point of Saturday's discussion, and with all the political discussion surrounding private, commercial and government use of drones, this didn't come as a surprise. Mermelstein explained to the gathered audience that drones are generally treated with the same rules as any other aircraft.

"We emphasize responsibility at Vermont Drone," Mermelstein said during the event. "We ask that our members put their names and phone numbers on their drones. If you're not willing to put your name on what you do with your drone, you shouldn't be flying at all."

Mermelstein also emphasized the fun and opportunity for artistic expression afforded those who fly drones. "It's the closest you can come to being a bird," he told his audience.

As much as the private sector might enjoy droning, the debate as to rules and regulations surrounding the unmanned aerial vehicles is ongoing in Montpelier and has been for several months. Just this year, the Department of Fish and Wildlife outlawed hunting using drones. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been lobbying state government for more regulations surrounding drones.

"Drones have been under a lot of discussion lately," said Allen Gilbert, the Executive Director of the Vermont branch of the ACLU. "At the current time, legislature is focused on regulating police use. Police should be required to get a warrant before using drones for surveillance or information gathering," said Gilbert, a comment with which Mermelstein later agreed in a

separate conversation.

Private and commercial drone users can relax for the time being, however. "We recommend no regulations for commercial and private drones," said Gilbert. "The FAA is working on crafting regulations. We don't think it should be different state-by-state. It should be consistent."

Gilbert brought the ACLU's drone discussion back to the responsibility of pilots. "In some cases, responsible drone use is protected by the First Amendment," he said. "There are good uses [for drones], but they could be a safety or a privacy issue."

So far, the FAA's federal regulations surrounding hobby droning are not too restrictive. "The FAA requires registration of drones. Each drone is tied to one owner and operator. It's about encouraging responsibility among the owners," said Mermelstein on Saturday, circling the conversation back once again to the idea of personal accountability among droners.

The droning community in the Northeast Kingdom is big, and it keeps getting bigger, according to Mermelstein. "We have about 150 subscribed members on our website, but we get a lot more at meetups who don't do the online community. I would say we have 220-230 members. For this area, that's pretty good," said Mermelstein. "90% of them are Vermonters."

"We're just starting to expand and do meetups in other states," Mermelstein added, expecting the hobby's following to grow even bigger.

Overall, Mermelstein was happy with his event. "We had a fantastic turnout," he said. "Overall, I was impressed. People had a lot of good questions."

Anyone who is interested in finding out more about drones in Vermont can go to www.vtdrone.com.

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