MEMORANDUM

Date: November 11th, 2026

To: City of Madison Heights Planning Commission [November 16th, 2026 Meeting]

From: Matt Lonnerstater, AICP – City Planner

Subject: Introduction – Zoning Text Amendments for Drone Facilities

Introduction

Businesses such as Amazon and Wal Mart are rapidly increasing their drone delivery programs throughout the country. Other businesses, such as Kroger and Lowes, are currently exploring options to utilize drones for same-day delivery. Michigan municipalities are prohibited from passing local ordinances to ban drone flights, create local "no-fly zones", or regulate aircraft noise while a drone is in the air. However, municipalities still retain the ability to adopt land-use based regulations (e.g. zoning standards) that restrict or regulate where drone operators may service, launch or land drones within a community.

Background

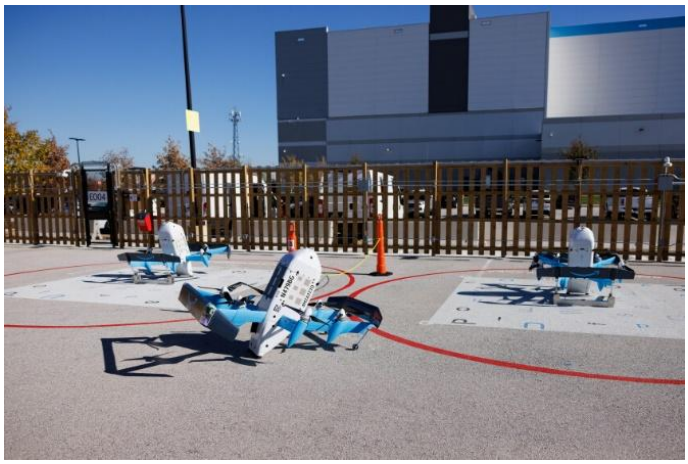
While Michigan law does not allow municipalities to regulate drones once they are off the ground (primarily under FAA guidance), municipalities do have the ability to regulate drone operations "on the ground" through land use and zoning standards. Madison Heights does not currently have any regulations pertaining to "on the ground" drone operations such as storage, charging, take-offs and landings. The term "drone" and other related terms such as "unmanned aircraft systems (UAS)" are entirely absent from the Madison Heights Code of Ordinances, including the Zoning Ordinance. This silence creates uncertainty as to where "on the ground" facilities may be permitted within the City and how they can be regulated, leaving it all up to administrative interpretations.

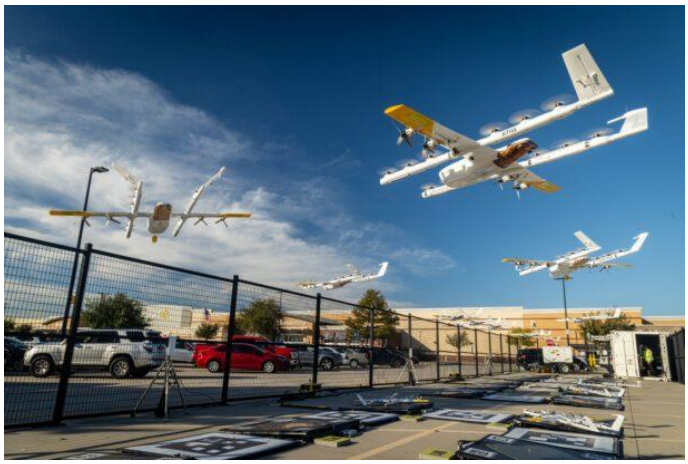
Madison Heights residents may have recently noticed an increase in commercial drone activity in the skies above the community. Amazon has launched its Prime Air drone delivery service from its Hazel Park regional fulfillment center, and Madison Heights is located within the service's 7.5-mile delivery radius. As a result, residents may see drones traveling overhead or making deliveries within the community.

The Hazel Park fulfillment center is a large warehouse facility on a 150-acre parcel located within an industrial zoning district. Hazel Park's Amazon drone launch/landing pads, therefore, are somewhat confined to an industrial area. However, businesses such as Wal Mart, Lowes, and Kroger, who have actual brick and mortar stores, typically place their drone facilities within a portion of the commercial parking lot, creating potential safety hazards to customers. These retail stores also tend to be located closer to sensitive residential areas, creating additional nuisance concerns.

Given the rapidly increasing use of drones for commercial delivery, the City of Madison Heights may wish to explore and establish regulatory standards for "on the ground" commercial drone facilities.

Amazon done launch facility (left); Walmart drone launch facility adjacent to parking lot (right)





Examples from Other Municipalities

Based on preliminary research, only a handful of Michigan municipalities currently regulate facilities used for drone operations, summarized below:

Plainfield Township and the City of Albion

Plainfield Township and the City of Albion both list "Drone (Unmanned Aerial) Centers" as a permitted or special land use in industrial districts, but do not define the use and do not have any additional use-specific regulations.

City of Southfield

A recently-adopted zoning text amendment added the following definitions:

- ***Drone:*** *A vehicle without a human operator onboard, controlled remotely or operating autonomously, designed to carry a payload of sensors or for delivery (also known as an Unmanned Vehicle).*
- ***Drone Port****: A designated area within a site intended for the takeoff, landing, staging, testing, training, storage, servicing or other operations of drones accessory to an approved permitted or special use operating on the same site.*

The Ordinance further defines "small drone ports" as facilities that occupy less than 15% of a site and "large drone ports" as facilities that occupy greater than 15% of a site. Small drone ports are permitted administratively, while large drone ports require site plan review by the Planning Commission. Both require fencing and screening.

Southfield permits drone ports as an accessory use to any permitted use in commercial and industrial districts and allows "centralized" delivery ports as an accessory use to residential communities.

Examples from Out of State

Due to the limited amount of drone-based land use regulations within Michigan, staff looked out of state for guidance. Even then, research produced few examples.

The City of College Park, Georgia contains the following definitions in their Zoning Ordinance:

> ***Unmanned Aircraft System:*** *Also known as a "drone," means an aircraft without a human pilot on board, controlled by an operator on the ground via remote control or other programming.*
>
> ***Unmanned Aircraft System Dispatch and Delivery Center:*** *A property and/or building thereon that serves as a base for drones to initiate delivery of commercial products or services to retail or wholesale customers which may, but does not have to, contain storage capacity for said commercial products or service tools and/or the control center for dispatch and flight regulation of said drones, and which has been approved for drone usage by FAA registration and waiver.*

College Park allows Unmanned Aircraft System Dispatch and Delivery Centers as a by-right use within their industrial zoning district. However, like Plainfield Township and Albion, there are no additional use-specific standards pertaining to the siting, screening, lighting, or setbacks of such facilities.

Several communities in Colorado have enacted moratoriums to temporarily prevent the establishment and operation of commercial drone delivery hubs to allow themselves time to draft and adopt ordinances. For example, the Town of Castle Rock adopted a 6-month moratorium in anticipation of Wal Mart submitting for an 18-drone port at its store within the town.

Castle Rock defines a "commercial drone delivery hub" as, *"an area used for the storage, charging, take-off and landing of private unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) for the purpose of picking up and discharging cargo."*

Planning Commission Discussion and Next Steps

In a recent newsletter, Walmart announced that they have plans to add 300 new drone launch/delivery sites throughout the country. Other retailers are sure to follow. Given the established nuisances related to drone launch/landing facilities such as light, noise, hours of operation, and proximity to residential areas, it may be beneficial for Madison Heights to proactively adopt reasonable standards for "on the ground" drone facilities and create new definitions within the Zoning Ordinance.

The City can explore both procedural review standards (e.g. requiring Special Land Use approval through a public hearing) and siting/land use standards (restricting to certain zoning districts; adopting use-specific standards relating to setbacks from residential uses, facility size, lighting, noise, house of operation, etc.).

If the Planning Commission elects to move forward with text amendments related to these on-the-ground drone facilities, staff can present a draft to the Planning Commission at an upcoming meeting prior to setting a public meeting date.

Attachments

Albion Zoning Regulations – Drones/Unmanned Aerial Centers
Southfield Zoning Regulations – Drone Ports (2026)
Castle Rock, CO Drone Moratorium (2026)
Walmart Press Release (2026)
Zoning Practice – Zoning for Drones (2023)