

Lauren Pak  
September 9, 2016

## Virginia Tech partners with Google to deliver Chipotle by drone

The future of flying cars and robot housekeepers is in a world not so far away. A unique partnership between the Virginia Tech Mid-Atlantic Aviation Partnership, GoogleX's Project Wing and Chipotle Mexican Grill, Inc. will soon deliver burritos by drone.

"We've been working on this project for several months," said Mark Blanks, director of the Mid-Atlantic Aviation Partnership. "I think down the road this is kind of a crawl-stage and we hope to help them with the crawl, walk and the run stages and see this through to a common, everyday occurrence. Right now it's certainly a research enterprise, but it will become a big commercial enterprise."

The tests will start with a small group of students on a closed site at Virginia Tech, but may expand. While much of the project's details, including its specific goals, are under wraps, it is no secret that autonomous food delivery may become a widespread reality.

"I'm optimistic that these trials will lead to new and valuable applications of unmanned aircraft, and also show a skeptical public the benefits of the technology," wrote Kevin Kochersberger, associate professor of mechanical engineering at Virginia Tech in an email to the Collegiate Times. "We are seeing the introduction of delivery drones on a limited scale, and I think there will be slow growth for years as liability and regulation is assessed along with the basic question, 'Is it profitable?'"

The project is part of a [\\$75 million plan](#) for intelligent infrastructure, funded in part by the university and by private partnerships. Autonomous vehicles are scheduled to start hitting the roads, skies and water by January 2017.

As of now, more than 80 faculty members across various Virginia Tech colleges are involved with the project. The university hopes to expand to include students of all disciplines, especially in related policy, social science, business, cyber-security and agricultural/forestry industries.

"The commitment across campus to create a unique and valuable living-learning experience for our students is extraordinary," said Virginia Tech President Tim Sands in a Virginia Tech [news release](#). "We expect more than 2,000 students to be involved in intelligent infrastructure study and research by 2022."

Tests will take place at the FAA-approved site in the Virginia Tech Mid-Atlantic Aviation Partnership. As one of seven sites of its kind in the United States, Virginia

Tech was selected for its emphasis on intelligent infrastructure and adequate facilities.

"Our role in this project has been to enable the operational piece of this research: the flight operations, the airspace access and we've also been coordinating all the facilities across campus," Blanks said.

Whether the project will expand or not depends on the [success of the testing phase](#): specifically, if the drones can navigate smoothly enough to deliver food — and keep it warm.

"I think that the vision of a future where you order food and have it delivered straight to you in an extremely short time is an exciting future," Blanks said. "It makes Virginia Tech a real place to go for the next generation of urban areas and city environments that will be much closer to the Jetsons than everybody imagined previously. It's a piece of a bigger picture of the university that is happening right now in real time and it's quite amazing to watch it unfold.