

October 16, 2026

Dear Members of the North Carolina Congressional Delegation,

The NC Chamber and North Carolina Critical Technologies Alliance, on behalf of the First in Defense Coalition and the many North Carolina companies, universities, and research institutions developing defense critical technologies, writes to urge you to champion the Department of War's proposed Autonomous Warfare Command (AUTOWARCOM) and to make North Carolina its home.

On September 30, Secretary Hegseth announced AUTOWARCOM as a new four-star functional combatant command with service-like authorities, built to scale autonomous and robotic capabilities across the Joint Force. The Department's own memo makes the command contingent on Congressional approval, with a target stand-up date of October 1, 2027. North Carolina should compete to win it, and we ask our Congressional delegation to lead that effort.

Why AUTOWARCOM Matters

Autonomous systems are the future of warfare. The Russia-Ukraine war shows how rapidly innovating and deploying autonomous systems—low-cost drones, unmanned surface vessels, and AI-enabled targeting solutions—at scale are critical in modern warfare. The Department's budget request reflects that shift. The Department's FY2027 request for the Defense Autonomous Warfare Group is roughly \$54.6 billion, up from about \$226 million today. Though much work remains to define AUTOWARCOM's mission and authorities, the proposed Command will be at the forefront of innovation and adoption of autonomous systems.

The command may also shape industries far beyond defense. The same autonomy software, sensors, edge computing, batteries, motors, and secure communications that power military drones and robots are transforming logistics, agriculture, infrastructure inspection, transportation, and emergency response.

The state that hosts AUTOWARCOM will become the place where government demand, operators, and commercial technologists converge. That concentration of customers and talent will draw companies, capital, and high-paying jobs for decades, as SOCOM has for Tampa and Space Command is expected to for Huntsville.

Why North Carolina Is Competitive

North Carolina can compete for AUTOWARCOM by leveraging its unique combination of operators, test ranges, industry, and top-tier research institutions – all of which will be critical to AUTOWARCOM's success.

- **North Carolina-based warfighters are already doing the mission.** The Department's memo says AUTOWARCOM will test systems against realistic opposition and field what works. That is already happening in North Carolina. Fort Bragg is the center of gravity for the nation's Tier One forces—often the first adopters of new technologies, such as autonomous systems. Fort Bragg is also home to expeditionary forces such as the XVIII Airborne Corps, which runs the Scarlet Dragon and Project Sandhills experiments with industry to field autonomous, attritable mass, as well as the new Joint Innovation Outpost

opened in January 2026. At Camp Lejeune, Marines conducted the Marine Corps' first live-fire test of lethal drone munitions in July 2025 and now train units on first-person-view attack drones.

- **Industry is building autonomous systems and foundational technologies.** North Carolina has a robust industry presence and startup ecosystem already developing autonomous systems for the military and commercial sectors alike. For example, the Air Force's FQ-44A Fury, one of its first two Collaborative Combat Aircraft, was first designed in North Carolina. Skyeton, a leading Ukrainian drone manufacturer, chose North Carolina for its U.S. headquarters. North Carolina also anchors foundational technologies, including rare earth magnets, batteries, and microelectronics, needed to scale the nation's production of drones, robotics, and unmanned maritime systems.
- **Research depth.** North Carolina's research institutions will provide AUTOWARCOM ready access to scientific and engineering expertise in autonomy, drones, maritime, and robotics. The Army Research Office recently funded Duke University to research counter-UAS technologies; North Carolina State University is a recognized leader in autonomous systems, such as autonomous labs and industrial robotics; the University of North Carolina at Charlotte is driving innovation in autonomous vehicles; and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington is a national leader in maritime cybersecurity. Coupled with non-profit institutions like RTI International, which is the consortium manager for the Genesis Mission Project, North Carolina's research institutions will ensure AUTOWARCOM has the strongest research and development infrastructure and support possible.
- **A proven bridge to commercial markets.** North Carolina flew more than half of all flights nationwide under the FAA's drone Integration Pilot Program, launched the country's first routine commercial drone delivery service, and continues to lead the nation in the future of mobility through participation in the FAA's BEYOND program. No state is better positioned to move military autonomy into civil airspace and commercial markets.
- **Land, sea, and airspace test ranges near decision-makers.** From mountainous terrain to the Sandhills ranges to the Atlantic littoral, North Carolina offers virtually every operating environment in which AUTOWARCOM must test its systems, all within a short flight or day's drive of the Pentagon and Norfolk.

What We Ask

We respectfully ask you to lead on the following:

1. **Authorize and fund AUTOWARCOM.** Support the authorities and resources the Command needs in the National Defense Authorization Act and associated appropriations so it can stand up on schedule.
2. **Require a transparent, competitive basing process.** Press the Department to publish clear basing criteria and allow every state to compete on the merits.
3. **Advance North Carolina as the host location.** We encourage you to build a unified, bipartisan delegation effort, including a letter to Secretary Hegseth and engagement with Project Agincourt leadership. We also encourage you to invite the command's planners to see firsthand autonomy experimentation at Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune and meet with the state's industry and research institutions that will support AUTOWARCOM's future

efforts.

The First in Defense Coalition Stands Ready

The First in Defense Coalition, led by the NC Chamber and the NC Critical Technologies Alliance, is prepared to help the delegation bring AUTOWARCOM to North Carolina. Leveraging the First in Defense coalition—a coalition of over 40 companies, universities, and economic development organizations—we can assemble site and capability data for a basing nomination, convene the companies and universities that would support the command, coordinate with the North Carolina General Assembly and state leaders on commitments, arrange site visits, and brief your staff on short notice.

North Carolina has the warfighters, the industry, and the research base to make AUTOWARCOM successful from day one. We are grateful for your support of North Carolina's defense community and look forward to working with your office to secure this command for our state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary Salamido".

Gary Salamido
President and CEO
NC Chamber

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jarrett Lane".

Jarrett Lane
Co-Founder & Chair
North Carolina Critical Technologies Alliance