



Friend of pilot killed in Methuen crash says the experimental aircraft was his passion

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COURTESY OF LAVENDER FAMILY

Alan Lavender.

By Matt Rocheleau and Andrew Grant

GLOBE STAFF AND GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 01, 2017

Bob Di Meo said he advised former Newburyport mayor Alan Lavender through the process of building his own plane and is unsure what could have caused the aircraft to crash Tuesday, killing Lavender.

Lavender had flown the plane for nearly a year after taking it for an inaugural flight last May, according to Di Meo.

“He built a nice airplane,” Di Meo said. “There wasn’t anything weird about how he built the aircraft.”

Di Meo said he last spoke with Lavender two or three weeks ago.



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“I asked him how things are going, and he said great and he was enjoying flying,” Di Meo recalled.

He said they met through the [Experimental Aircraft Association chapter 106](#), which includes about 200 members from around Greater Boston and is based out of Lawrence Municipal Airport, where Lavender was attempting to land Tuesday.

Di Meo, a New Hampshire resident, is vice president of the chapter.

He said the Sonex plane Lavender built from a kit is “a good aircraft.”

“There’s hundreds of them flying,” said Di Meo, who flies a Van’s Aircraft RV-8 he built himself about 12 years ago.

Di Meo said he has had no incidents flying his own plane and said that while [data](#) show amateur-built aircraft are more accident prone than standard-built aircraft, he does not consider them to be particularly dangerous.

The Federal Aviation Administration in a [2012 study](#) on amateur-built aircraft safety found that between 2001 and 2010, amateur-built aircraft consistently had significantly higher rates of accidents overall, and of fatal accidents, than non-amateur built aircraft.

That study found that, in particular, the [first 50 hours](#) of flight in an amateur-built aircraft were uniquely challenging.

Not only is that when the aircraft gets its first airborne test, which regulations require to be done without passengers, but for some pilots, it may mark their first time trying to fly that kind of an aircraft.

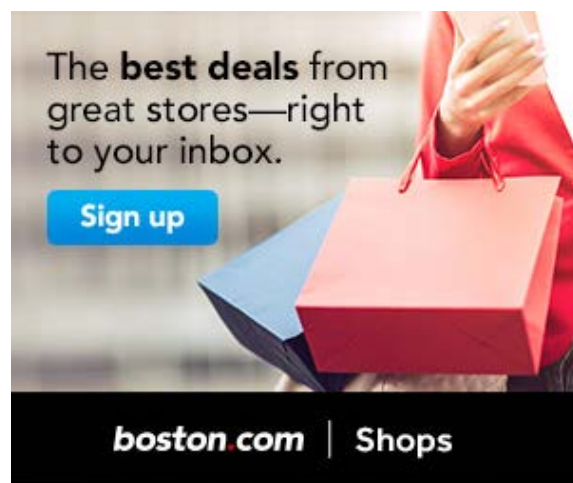
Di Meo said that once the planes get through the initial test phase, the odds of issues arising decrease significantly and come much closer to the accident rates of other type of aircraft.

“Once they’re flying and the pilots have gotten used to the aircraft the accident rate is almost comparable,” to that of standard aircraft, he said.

Accidents are still fairly uncommon for amateur-built aircraft and deadly accidents are even less common.

The FAA study found that in 2010 among amateur-built aircraft there were 21 accidents, and five fatal accidents, per 100,000 flight hours.

And amateur-built aircraft have [become safer](#) in recent years.



“With the help of outreach, updated safety materials . . . and new policies, this segment of the [general aviation] industry is showing improvement,” the FAA said in a [fact sheet](#) released last summer.

Helping to drive the improved safety record for amateur-built aircraft is their increasingly popularity.

A 2012 Government Accountability Office [report](#) called amateur-built aircraft “the fastest growing segment of the general aviation fleet.”

Di Meo said that the rise of kits to build airplanes, instead of having to built them from scratch, has made amateur-built aircraft more popular.

Under FAA regulations, if an individual builds at least 51 percent of an aircraft, the aircraft is eligible to be registered in the amateur-built category, according to Dick Knapinski, spokesman for the Experimental Aircraft Association.

He said that there are 30,000 recreational aircraft registered with the Federal Aviation Administration, a number that goes up by about 1,000 every year.

They are constructed from either kits or approved plans and take between 1,000-3,000 hours to build, he said.

Once the planes are built, they have to be inspected by the FAA before they are ever allowed in the air, according to Knapinski.

Planes are then inspected every year or every 100 hours of flight time, whichever comes first, he said. Pilots have to be licensed, which requires undergoing at least 40 hours of training. They must pass a test every two years to renew their license.

Officials from the association, which was founded in 1953 and counts some 200,000 members internationally, say that people build planes themselves for a variety of reasons, “a personal challenge; education; performance; or to invest “sweat equity” into the cost of an airplane.”

Costs range from under \$10,000 to more than \$100,000 based on desired performance characteristics and optional engine and avionics packages, according to the association. By comparison, a new factory-built Cessna 172 costs more than \$250,000.

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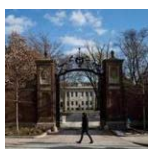
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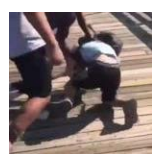
Police disperse hundreds of youths in the North End

State Police spokesman David Procopio said Boston police requested Massachusetts State Police assistance with dispersing between 500 and 1,000 youths. [MORE...](#)



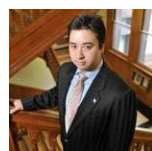
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John Sweeney averaged 65 miles a day, mostly along Route 20, a 3,365-mile ribbon of asphalt that is the longest road in the United States. [MORE...](#)



State Police investigate video of youths fighting on pier in Quincy

A video of youths being punched and kicked is making the rounds on social media. [MORE...](#)



Cambridge city councilor to leave politics

Cambridge city councilor Leland Cheung, the first Asian-American on the council, announced this week that he intends to leave politics. [MORE...](#)



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Michelle Carter receives 15 months in jail; will remain free pending appeal

A judge sentenced Michelle Carter to two and a half years, with 15 months to serve and 15 months probation, for goading her boyfriend to kill himself in a high-profile texting suicide case. However, he allowed Carter to remain free while awaiting appeal. [MORE...](#)



'Dukes of Hazzard' actor arrested in Waltham

Tom Wopat was arraigned on a charge of groping a woman who was to share the stage with him in a local production of "42nd Street." [MORE...](#)

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