Aerial drone SHPD’s newest public safety tool

Officer drone certified; BOMA to approve new police drone policy

SPRING HILL, TENN. – The Spring Hill Police Department (SHPD) has a new law enforcement tool at its disposal to help officers take a bird’s eye view of crime and traffic accident scenes previously only possible with a manned aircraft.
The department recently purchased an Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) or Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), most commonly known as a “drone,” equipped with photo and video capability. The drone will aid the department in a wide range of uses, such as providing an aerial view of HAZMAT incidents and major traffic crash scenes, which helps with investigation and incident reconstruction; having a bird’s eye view during search and rescue missions, or when searching for missing children; tracking an aggressor during any critical incident, such as one involving the PD’s Special Response Team or during a hostage situation; tracking a suspect on the run; traffic monitoring, such as photographing or videoing an intersection where accidents frequently occur, examining storm water drainage issues, school traffic dynamics, roadway construction projects, traffic flow patterns, or any issues that may impact roadway safety.

“To be clear, the drone will not be used for traffic enforcement or issuing citations, invasion of privacy, surveillance, or other uses deemed improper,” said Police Chief Don Brite. “Use of a UAV will be allowed in any situation where a search warrant has been obtained. To further calm any fears about the use of the aircraft, there will not be any weapons attached to it.”

On July 17, the Spring Hill Board of Mayor and Aldermen will vote on the SHPD’s Unmanned Aircraft Systems Operations Policy, which was discussed at the board’s July 3 work session.

The drone has a “Small UAS Certificate of Registration” from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). SHPD Detective Geoff Betts became licensed in April to fly the craft, earning his UAS remote pilots license from the FAA. The SHPD’s drone policy requires the drone to only be flown by Det. Betts or another trained individual under the direct supervision of Det. Betts. Chief Brite or his designee must preapprove all flights. Eventually, two additional officers will become UAS certified to ensure the drone is available for flight at all times.

“This is a tool that is catching on with law enforcement, and the more we learn about the capabilities of what a UAV can do, our department can find ways to function more efficiently,” Chief Brite said. “Obviously, we can’t put a helicopter in our budget. So, this is a tool that can provide that same aerial view at a small fraction of the expense.”

Super Target in The Crossings at Spring Hill donated a smaller drone to the SHPD in 2016 that also is registered and can be used for supplemental police uses or training. The department’s primary drone (pictured) is a commercial grade “Small UAS.”

PUBLIC SAFETY DRONE TRENDS

- At least 347 local law enforcement, fire and emergency responder agencies have acquired flying drones for official use.*

- At least 167 agencies, including police, sheriff, fire and emergency units, acquired drones in 2016, more than twice the number in 2015. More agencies attained drones in 2016 than in the previous three years combined.*

- Among agencies that use drones, 63 percent are sheriff or police departments.*

*According to an April 2017 study on “Public Safety Drones,” by the Center for the Study of the Drone, a research institute based at Bard College in New York.