
Medina County Sheriff's Office drones cleared for flight

Gazette staff

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It's a bird. It's a plane. No, it's a drone.

The Medina County Sheriff's Office is the only sheriff's agency in Ohio with a Federal Aviation Administration permit to fly unmanned aircraft.

The sheriff's two drones look like model helicopters, but operate basically like the larger drones used by the military and CIA to find and destroy targets in the Middle East.

But unlike the military drones, which are armed with lethal missiles, the mission of the sheriff's drone is peaceful.

"It's our eyes in the sky and to be used for finding missing people, not surveillance," said Sgt. Jim Sanford. "The purpose is to save time and manpower

when searching for missing people or an armed suspect.”

Sheriff Tom Miller said he wants to use the device to assist the county's SWAT team during an emergency, scan treed areas for missing kids, help during a hostage crisis and aid fire departments by getting aerial images of large fires or train accidents.

Sanford and Deputy Bob Locher are learning to fly the drone. Sanford said practice flights have been going on for a year at Plum Creek Park, in Brunswick Hills Township, and at a site west of Homerville. The training should be completed by April.

Drones are a growing trend nationwide.

More than 80 law enforcement agencies, colleges and other government agencies across the nation have been granted or applied for permits to fly drones, according to FAA records released by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a civil liberties organization based in California.

In Ohio, Lorain County Community College and the Ohio Department of Transportation have been cleared for drone use, in addition to the Medina County sheriff.

Of the Sheriff's Office's two drones, one is used for training flights and the other is equipped with a video camera. The drones weigh about 2 pounds and can stay in flight 15 to 20 minutes before the battery runs down.

“It will hold its own in a steady wind but uses a bunch of power,” Sanford said.

The drones can reach an altitude of about 500 feet and have a range of about a mile.

Miller said his office would have to obtain a search warrant through a judge if it ever wanted to use the aircraft for surveillance on an individual.

"Surveillance is not our purpose here, and it's not really designed for that," he said.

The aircraft is similar to a remote-control helicopter. When flying the device, pilots don glasses that allow them to view a real-time video transmission from the drone, Sanford said.

MADE IN SEVILLE

The two drones were developed and manufactured by a local company, Vista UAS, of Seville.

The company donated the two drones to the Sheriff's Office in 2011.

"They needed some law enforcement expertise on how and when a drone could be used," Sanford said. "We're a local agency, so they got with us."

The company has been working for about eight years to develop the product, and during the last year it's been working to sell them to other law enforcement agencies, said Bryon Macron, sales manager for Vista UAS.

"The purpose of this is really to utilize it for what you would use a helicopter for," Macron said. The drones are cheaper than manned helicopters, and in dangerous hostage situations or fires, they can get in closer to the incident without risking human life.

"It's really a tool for any emergency where you need eyes in the sky," he said. The technology and software also allows departments to push a live stream of the camera in the sky across smart phones to other officers,

The company has a couple of different drone types to perform tasks. The type given to the sheriff is equipped with an infrared camera.

"I sell a larger model to EMAs (emergency management agencies) that can drop in and get a reading on an ammonia or gas leak," Macron said.

Macron said his company has worked with 10 different agencies in the last three weeks. Most often, it's rural county sheriffs who are interested.

He said urban counties, such as Cleveland's Cuyahoga County, aren't likely buyers because drones aren't allowed to fly over densely populated areas. Macron said the FAA requires drone operators to complete training to be licensed.

"That means anyone who's using it knows how to use it properly," he said.

Macron said Vista is about to expand its facility in Seville and has been looking for larger space, but plans to remain in Medina County.

"We don't want to leave. This is where I live, and it's where I want to stay," Macron said.

Vista has completed sales to law enforcement in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky, he said. While Vista hopes

someday to expand nationwide, it doesn't plan to conduct sales to private citizens, Macron said.

"We want this to be used for law enforcement purposes only," he said.

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