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Orinda Police use GoFundMe to buy a drone

By Sora O'Doherty



Drone demonstration

Somewhat surprised Orinda city council members were treated to a first-ever indoor flight of a drone in the Library Auditorium as Orinda Police Chief Mark Nagel and Contra Costa Sheriff's Officer Joe Ladner gave a demonstration with a drone similar to the one that is proposed for the Orinda Police Department. Nagel explained that in his continuing effort to obtain the best supplies and equipment to police Orinda, his department started a GoFundMe campaign last year to raise money for the purchase of a drone. Within just a couple of months, the community responded favorably and more than enough money was raised to purchase a drone with all of the capabilities that the chief believes the department needs.

The drone, which will cost approximately \$4,000, will be used, for example, at times when the sheriff's helicopter is not available. Unlike a helicopter, the drone flies so high up that it cannot be heard or seen from the ground.

However, the chief assured the council that it will not be used for routine surveillance, which would violate the existing sheriff's policy on drone use. As well, it would not even be possible, he said, as the drone battery only lasts about 30 minutes.

Part of the presentation included footage from Lafayette's drone, which responded to an incident at the Orinda BART station when two thieves snatched a laptop and took off into the hills, where they could not be followed in a vehicle. The drone was able to locate the two men, who were then successfully arrested by OPD officers.

Drones must be operated by certified pilots. Ladner is one of 20 sheriff's officers currently certified, and it is expected that more officers will become certified as well. In addition, Nagel would like every officer to be trained as a "spotter," an officer who looks out for other aircraft. The drone is small and can be kept in a backpack in a police vehicle, thus readily available when the need arises. The drone will be owned by the city, and will be operated according to sheriff policy. The drone will be a one-time purchase, funded with the money raised from the public. Maintenance costs are low. For example, replacement blades costs about \$10 each. The drone should not require replacement for at least three or four years.

The drone will also have a public address system, so it could be used to alert the public in the event of a dangerous situation. It will be equipped with an HDMI port and will broadcast on a secured network to police computers and perhaps to other devices as well.

The council was enthusiastic. Council Member Nick Kosla described the purchase as "a big bang for your buck," and Council Member Amy Worth was impressed with the technology that can improve safety in the community, including use for search and rescue as well as crime fighting. Council Member Darlene Gee thought it was the best demonstration since she's been on the council.

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