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Council gets an update on the police drone

By Sora O'Doherty

Police Chief Dave Cook updated the city council at its Feb. 18 meeting on the drone that was purchased last year for the Orinda Police Department. Since its inception last year, the department's small Unmanned Aerial Systems (Drone) program "has proven to be a valuable asset" in enforcing laws and/or protecting lives, according to Cook.

Officer John Scanlon, who pilots the device, showed the council members the department's drone, including its controller and attachments that are important to public safety, such as the camera, a spotlight and a speaker that can broadcast the voice of the drone operator or a prerecorded message. The camera can be switched between daylight and infrared, which Cook explained is incredibly important in detecting differences in surface temperatures, notably body or engine heat. The drone comes with an extra battery and is capable of 20 minutes of flight time.

Orinda's program was started last year after former Police Chief Mark Nagel was authorized by the council to purchase the DJI Mavic 2 Enterprise drone for use by the police department. The department also trained two drone pilots, certified by the Federal Aviation Administration. The program's startup, including initial equipment purchase and FAA certification of the pilots, cost around \$4,300 and was funded by community donations. Cook said ancillary costs to his department to date, associated with ongoing training and equipment maintenance, have been small.

Cook presented examples of drone photos of a Santa Rosa fire which demonstrated how drones can be used for post-disaster mapping. The drone is also used for over-watch of officer safety, scene preservation and documentation, suspicious devices, evaluating hazardous materials incidents, search and rescue missions, recovery of post incident damage assessment, and training events.

The Orinda drone has been used on a swat team call out of a barricaded suspect in Tara Hills, to search for a suspect who fled from a vehicle in Pleasant Hill, in the Oakley Bethel Island fires, to search for people after a boat sunk off Pittsburg, and to gather crime scene photos after a homicide in Bay Point. In Orinda, drones have been used to document the crime scene after the Airbnb party shooting on Halloween, on two occasions to search for suspects who fled from a vehicle in Wilder, to search for elderly missing residents from Irwin Way, and a swat callout on Hall Drive. Most of the missions for the Orinda craft were to assist outside agencies; most of the missions in Orinda were flown by other craft.

Recently, he said, drones from the team were deployed in Orinda to assist in the search and rescue of suspects who had run from the California Highway Patrol after a pursuit. On another call, a craft was used to help with the documentation of a traffic collision, in which an Orinda resident was gravely injured.

Additionally, when the Central County SWAT team assisted the Walnut Creek Police Department with taking an armed suspect into custody in the city of Orinda, the small unmanned aircraft systems team used drones to provide continuous, vital information to command staff, Cook said.

The use of drones can help the department provide safety overview for officers searching for suspects, examine suspicious devices without putting officers in harm's way, evaluate hazardous materials from a safe distance, document crime scenes, and conduct search and rescue missions of missing or lost persons, according to the police chief.

Reaffirming that the drones are not used for things like routine traffic stops, "The drones are absolutely not day-to-day tools of enforcement," he told the city council, adding "they are generally fairly specialized, but enhancement of officer safety, especially, cannot be overstated." Council Member Nick Kosla said he was initially concerned with how the drone would be used but he now recognizes that the program is well worth the cost and assists with enforcement and officer safety. Vice Mayor Amy Worth thanked Cook for his presentation and especially for showing examples of its use.

Orinda's drones have been used on several occasions in support of other agencies and most missions in Orinda were flown by craft from other agencies, Cook said. Trading resources has been more efficient and effective, he added. Pilot Officer John Scanlon noted he has used the drone on Irwin Way where elderly folks have walked away and has found it to be successful.

In moving forward, OPD requests the council's continued support of the program. The maintenance of the drone is fairly insignificant. Pilots attend training monthly and minor equipment must periodically be replaced. Eventually, the department hopes to take advantage of technological advancements to allow video taken by the drone to be cast to another location.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

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