

Supplemental Appropriation #24-21 to the FY24 Operating Budget Montgomery County Government Department of Police Drone as First Responder Pilot Program, \$350,000 [Oct. 17, 2023]

We have less and less privacy, and drones take in more information than the human eye. My name is Tim Pruss, and I am a resident of Montgomery County and a small business owner. Since 2020, I have owned and operated MyDrone.Pro an aerial photography and videography business. A portion of my work entails the use of drones for photojournalism. Over the past three years I have taken hundreds of photos and videos of first responder incidents, taking in much more information than the perspective of any one set of eyes. I am aware of the importance of the loss of privacy, I am here to testify in support of the Montgomery County Government Department of Police Drone as First Responder Pilot Program, after weighing the tradeoff of a loss of some potential privacy in order for first responders to have significantly better imagery to improve the safety of our officers and the community at large.

In September of this year, I attended a presentation by Captain Jason Coklnos and MCPD on its proposed pilot program. It was informative and provided a clear window into how MCPD was planning on implementing its proposed drone program.

What I appreciated about the proposed program is the following.

1. **Builds off Lessons Learned** - This proposed program is modelled after Chula Vista Police Department drone program.
2. **Minimizes Noise and Safety** - It will be launched from the rooftop launch pads in Wheaton and Silver Spring. This will reduce noise and provide a safer launch point for the drones.
3. **Includes strict Video Regulations** - This program will follow the same regulations that govern how police body cameras and dash camera footage are used and stored would apply to the video shot by the drones.
4. **Involves transparency** - It provides significant transparency of the proposed pilot program allowing for monitoring and program improvements.

What I know based on my years of experience as an aerial photojournalist is that drones are an excellent tool. Drones can provide rapid access to high quality imagery.

Getting speedy, quality perspectives is crucial for law enforcement. The way the systems currently work, when 911 calls are dispatched, officers are provided limited information about what is going on in the given situation regarding the incident. Faster and much more high-quality imagery makes all the difference in apprehending suspects—including threatening criminals and saving the lives of citizens in danger.

A video image with details providing context would also completely change the officer's abilities to respond to 911 calls. Specific facts allowing officers to use their professional training to analyze a scene more accurately, would give officers a much higher level of quality information enabling them to make more informed decisions regarding what they will expect and what they will need—what conditions and obstacles they encounter—what walls are like, will there be dogs, is there a tree blocking a roadway. For example, if there are downed wires, knowing completely accurately where wires are down would enable officers to avoid danger and to warn others much more quickly. A significantly higher precision of information would allow officers to be mentally and physically much more prepared and much more able to provide safety for themselves, innocent victims, and bystanders.

Certainly, privacy is important, and without having experience with this technology, I understand how people could feel anxious about its use; however, a 911 call is not surveillance. Likewise, this program will not be a surveillance program. This Drone as First Responder program will not be used for monitoring gatherings, rallies, or people. This program will provide trained professional first responders with more information prior to arriving at the scene to be significantly more prepared for themselves and those they protect.

If we expect excellence from our police force who serve and protect our communities, it is right then to provide them with access to tools and technologies that can improve the preparedness of our officers. I strongly support the pilot initiative of the Montgomery County Government Department of Police Drone as First Responder Program.

Thank you for your time.

Tim Pruss