

Madison County Sheriff's Office pondering possibilities of new drone purchase

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - After a budget committee approved the purchase request for the **Madison County Sheriff's Office** to receive a new drone and two all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), the decision is now in the hands of the **Madison County Board** to approve or decline the request at its meeting next Wednesday, February 15, 2017.

If it passes, **Maj. Jeff Connor** of the **Madison County Sheriff's Office** expects the drone and ATVs to be a tremendous asset to the sheriff's office, especially for search and rescue operations. The drone to be purchased by the sheriff's office is a **DJI Matrice M600 Industrial UAV**, priced at \$29,807. That whopping figure is not so outlandish, however, when the entire package is factored. Connor said that price tag comes with the drone, extra propellers, cameras, two controllers, extra batteries, a fast charger, two iPad minis and a hard case for transporting it.

"The total package comes with just about everything we're going to need for this drone," he said.

The drone's potential for the Madison County Sheriff's Office is not yet known, because it first needs to be purchased and secondly, personnel needs to be trained in its usage. Connor said he is sure the sheriff's office will find all sorts of possibilities for the drone in the future, but focus for its potential usage is currently being directed toward search and rescue as well as post-incident events.

"This could be something we use once a month, or something we use several times a month," he said. "It's good to have the resources at our disposal, however."

Possible uses for the drone, which will have a fleer camera as well as a zoom-capable camera, are being discussed within the sheriff's office presently. Connor said it could be used to better search a wider area for missing persons, and could offer officers a better view for incidents such as fatal accidents and storm damage. For the former scenario, Connor said the drone could be an invaluable resource for crash scene reconstruction.

Another use for the drone could be to alleviate the sheriff's office current dependency on helicopter assistance from St. Louis County - the closest agency with law enforcement rotor operations. While a drone would not completely replace the need for a helicopter in all situations, Connor said it could help officers requiring immediate air assistance at difficult times, such as the middle of the night.

Connor also said the drone could be used in "fluid situations" and for "officer safety." He said the Granite City Police Department recently utilized its drone to look into a suspect's car to check if he had a gun. That suspect was believed to have been shot as well, so it was also used to look at his safety, Connor said. He also said the drone could be used to view large gatherings, such as protests, and alert officers to the need and number of officers at that event for officer safety.

The drone has a 10 pound carrying capacity, with the ability to release as well. Connor said that could be used to drop life-saving supplies to people in desperate situations.

While he could not comment on the nature of some incidents, Connor said the drone could have been utilized several times in memory for the sheriff's office in the name of officer safety. He could not comment onto the use of the drone as a surveillance device, except saying it could be used to better enhance officer safety during fluid situations and be used to scope large gatherings. It cannot and will not be outfitted with an weapons, Connor assured.

"We're excited about it," he said. "It's a new part of law enforcement. Law enforcement is evolving with technology, and we're excited about this chapter."

If the county approves the purchase, Connor said it may be as long as a month before the drone is delivered, and training for it may take several weeks before it can be completely put into service.

That package includes a request for the acquisition of two **2017 Polaris Sportsmen 570 ATVs**, which will join an aging Gator ATV in the Madison County Sheriff's Office's fleet. Those, Connor said, will be used for search and rescue operations, especially in some of the more remote and rural areas of Madison County. Those have been priced at \$13,998, not including a trailer, which Connor said will be required for hauling all three vehicles.

Connor said both the drone and the ATVs were already being planned by the Madison County Sheriff's Office for "quite some time," and thorough research on manufacturers as well as the needs and uses for the sheriff's office has been conducted.