

Drones Find Place in Public Service in New York Towns

August 13, 2018



(TNS) — Long Island municipalities and police departments are flying drones — once used primarily by the military and hobbyists — for public safety, firefighting and town planning.

Officials are using drone footage to guide firefighters at perilous scenes, monitor municipal property and evaluate storm damage. Most recently, state park police flew drones to look for sharks last month after two children were reported bitten in the ocean off Fire Island.

“It’s become one of our go-to tools very quickly,” Smithtown Public Safety Chief John Valentine said.

Smithtown, one of Long Island’s earliest and most aggressive adopters of drone technology, began using drones to conduct damage assessments after superstorm Sandy in 2012 and has since expanded to other planning and public safety applications. Flights in the town are increasingly routine: Cheaper than anything a helicopter could provide, more current and customizable than images from a satellite or airplane.

Nassau County has been flying its two drones for years, producing two- and three-dimensional maps for the Department of Public Works. The Suffolk County Police Department uses its drones to aid in automobile crashes and other emergencies.

Other towns are catching up with the technology. Southampton Town Police Chief Steven Skrynecki said that within months, his department would field a drone with infrared capabilities to locate fleeing suspects at night and enough power to carry and drop a life vest to distressed swimmers along the town's miles of shoreline. Other anticipated uses include traffic information and surveillance of barricaded subjects. Five officers have trained to use it.

"The drone allows us to replicate some of the capabilities of a helicopter at a fraction of the cost," Skrynecki said.

Drone use has grown rapidly from its early application in the battlefield, experts say. Industries such as agriculture and construction have taken advantage of the technology's expansion into retail markets. The civil government and commercial sector of the drone market is expected to grow to \$13 billion by 2020, according to investment bank Goldman Sachs.

John Gonzales, a communications technician for Smithtown and third assistant chief for the St. James Fire Department, flies the department's \$1,500 drone above commercial buildings to do fire response preplanning, such as determining ladder positioning.

Gonzales said drones also have been used during water rescues on the Nissequogue River and Long Island Sound. "The drone does 40 miles per hour; the boat does 10" and can be slowed further by low tide in the river, which can expose water hazards, he said.

Smithtown planners, who have used aerial photographs to map the town's geography and track development since the 1930s. "We've always used cameras," said planning chief Peter Hans. "Now we just have one that flies."

Planners hover the drone over construction sites about once a week, abiding by FAA rules to keep under 400 feet and only fly within line of sight. Hans used the drone earlier this summer to capture a bird's-eye view of a Main Street parking lot due for a major overhaul, rescaling and overlaying the image with construction blueprints minutes later at his office with a few mouse clicks.

The cameras that fly have also been used to settle compliance issues.

Hans proved to managers of a fast-food restaurant in Commack that its outdoor lights were flooding the night sky and needed to be shifted. Armed with photographic evidence, Hans said, he got quick compliance without having to resort to citations. He asked that the business not be named. "I don't want to shame the business," he said. "I just want to make it so it's code compliant."

Arthur Holland Michel, co-director of the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College in upstate Dutchess County, said there are technological and regulatory drawbacks that limit drones' usefulness. Training may be needed in geographic information systems and other types of software to fully exploit drones' capabilities, one of the reasons Southold Supervisor Scott Russell said he prefers to hire a private firm to provide and fly a drone instead of buying one, at least for now: "It's a technical art,"

he said, adding that three operators have approached him in the past year offering their services — for a fee.

There may also be privacy perils: “Previously, if you wanted to watch someone from the sky, you needed a helicopter or airplane to do so, and an expensive camera,” Michel said. “It set a natural limit to the amount of airborne intrusion” from private citizens or government agencies. The limits under law may change as technology and litigation unfold, he said.

Valentine said that Smithtown isn’t using its drones for investigations and tax assessments for those reasons. “We don’t want to get in a situation where it could be perceived as infringing on someone’s rights.”

How some towns use drones:

- Smithtown: Direct firefighters in dense brush in Blydenburgh Park earlier this year from an unobstructed vantage point in the sky.
- East Hampton Town: Check for incursion by private property owners onto its nature preserves.
- North Hempstead: Publicize Harbor Links, its luxury public golf course, using drone footage.
- Babylon: Build an archive of drone footage of town properties to expedite future applications for storm assistance.

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