

“WATERLOO BASED DRONE HELPS POLICE IN SEARCH OF MISSING CAMBRIDGE WOMAN”

WATERLOO REGION — A drone from Waterloo-based Aeryon Labs Inc. was used in a recent search for a missing Cambridge woman, to help Waterloo Regional Police take photos and video of wooded areas in Blair and eliminate those places from the search.

RELATED STORIES

Eagles vs. Drones:
Dutch police eye...

The 47-year-old woman, who had learning disabilities, was found the next day walking in Fairview Park Mall. She was safe.

Letter to the editor:
Public...

Using an "unmanned aerial vehicle" assisted police in getting into areas that would have made it difficult for officers when every minute counts in a search.

Drones: This year's
hot gift a...

"We were able to minimize the search area because time is of the essence," said Staff Sgt. Mike Haffner.

The Record's view:
Expect drone...

The helicopter-like drone has four propellers and an attached camera with 30x optical zoom capabilities. The thermal camera can also detect heat sources, which is helpful in finding people.

Drone danger: near
miss with...

Weighing just over five pounds, it can fly in snow or rain and in winds up to 90 kilometres an hour.

VIDEO: Drone's eye
view of LRT...

The woman was reported missing on Feb. 6 at about 3:30 p.m. She had gone for a walk, leaving her West Galt home and was expected home in an hour.

When she didn't return, family members called police and the search began.

Haffner said an employee from Aeryon Labs flew the drone in areas around Grand River from West Galt to the Blair area. The drone can fly as high as 1,500 feet but is restricted to 400 feet according to Transport Canada regulations.

Police were concerned about the cold temperatures that night and wondering if the woman had sought shelter in areas not easily seen. They believe the woman had gone to the mall and stayed in a nearby apartment building to keep warm.

Haffner said there are clear advantages in using drones to assist in searches or to take photos and video of fatal crash sites.

"We will be looking into this," Haffner said.

But like all operational issues, there is a hefty cost and police face budget constraints, he said.

Aeryon Labs drones start at about \$75,000 and can exceed \$100,000.

To date, the Ontario Provincial Police, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, York Regional Police and Halton Regional Police are using drones.

Locally, Waterloo Region REACT started using a drone to capture aerial images of crash sites in September. REACT is a worldwide group of volunteers who assist emergency responders at crash sites, parades and large community event.

The group purchased their drone for about \$4,500 and four volunteers are certified drone pilots through the Ministry of Transportation.

REACT, which stands for Radio Equipped Associated Communication Teams, is a group of volunteers who assist emergency responders at crash sites, parades and large community events.

David Proulx, vice-president of product and marketing for Aeryon Labs, said the company has customers in public safety such as fire and police, the military and high-end commercial businesses such as large power generating companies.

The battery-operated drone has software that can be used by an operator on the ground with a tablet.

"Anyone should be able to fly it. You don't need specialized training," he said.

Proulx said company representatives have made presentations to police groups in Houston, Tex., and Columbus, Ohio and they are set to go to Florida. Michigan State Police have purchased drones, he said.

In addition to search and rescues and fatal traffic crashes, the drone can also be used when emergency response team is called out to a home where someone has barricaded themselves and police need to a scan of the neighbourhood to ensure others are not in harm's way. Proulx said.

"It can check the perimeter of the area in real time without delaying the response," he said.

A drone was used to assist in the search of a missing University of Virginia student in 2014.

"Drones are a hot topic in tech," Proulx said. "They are the eyes in the sky to direct ground response."

Imonteiro@therecord.com , Twitter: @MonteiroRecord
