



COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

The Committee on Public Safety met on July 9, 2026 in the Lower Hearing Room to discuss the Watertown Police Department's proposed First Responder Drone Program.

Present were Nicole Gardner, Chair, Vincent ("Vinnie") Piccirilli, Vice Chair, and Emily Izzo, Secretary. Also present were Councilor Tony Palomba; Police Chief Justin Hanrahan; Captain Ken Swift; Captain Dan Unsworth; Wilson Riendeau of Paladin Drones; various residents including Josh Geller and Lei Ma, and by zoom, residents Joan Gumbleton, Linda Scott, Angeline Kounelis, Tom Dickie, and David Gavran. Residents Maddie Nicole, Robin Page, Madeline Clay, and Kate Early arrived in person after the meeting began.

Chair Gardner called the meeting to order at 7:04 p.m.

At the outset of the meeting, Chair Gardner explained that she and Councilor Sideris have been in discussions with representatives from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which is currently developing model guidance regarding police drone programs. She stated that the Committee would not be taking any votes or making recommendations on the proposal at this meeting and anticipated reconvening in the fall after the ACLU guidance has been released so that the Committee can consider the issue with additional information.

Police Chief Justin Hanrahan then presented the proposed Watertown Police First Responder Drone Program (Attachment A). Chief Hanrahan explained that the primary goals of the program are to improve public safety, enhance first responder safety, and provide responding officers with real-time information during emergency incidents. He emphasized that the proposed program is intended to function as a first responder tool rather than a surveillance program. The autonomous drone would deploy in response to certain emergency calls and, in many cases, arrive at the scene before responding officers, allowing dispatch and first responders to better assess conditions before arriving on scene.

Chief Hanrahan discussed several examples of how drone technology has been successfully utilized by other law enforcement agencies, including locating missing or endangered persons, assisting with search and rescue operations, documenting accident and crime scenes, evaluating hazardous situations, and improving officer and community safety. He noted that obtaining aerial information early in an incident may reduce unnecessary ground searches, improve deployment decisions, and allow responders to determine whether additional police, fire, or EMS resources are needed before arriving at a scene.

Wilson Riendeau of Paladin Drones provided an overview of the proposed system and answered technical questions from the Committee. He explained that Paladin currently works with approximately 150 public safety agencies and described the autonomous deployment capabilities of the system. Chief Hanrahan stated that he became familiar with the technology after attending a chiefs' conference and believed it offered capabilities that distinguish it from traditional manually operated drones.

The Committee devoted a substantial portion of the meeting to discussing privacy protections, data management, and oversight of the proposed program. Chief Hanrahan explained that the Police Department intends to adopt a written policy governing the operation of the drone program, including limitations on authorized uses, supervisory approval requirements, operator training. The Department also plans to establish a public transparency portal documenting drone deployments. Committee members discussed data retention policies, the circumstances under which footage could be shared with outside agencies, and safeguards to prevent misuse of the technology. Representatives from Paladin explained that the system records video only, not audio, that transmissions are encrypted, and that the Department would maintain control over recorded data. They further stated that the company has implemented security measures designed to protect information and prevent unauthorized access.

Committee members also discussed operational considerations, including FAA compliance, weather limitations, battery life, flight altitude, expected service life, supervisor approval, operator training, liability, maintenance, insurance coverage, and contract terms. Paladin representatives explained that the proposed agreement includes maintenance, repairs, replacement drones during servicing, and liability coverage through the vendor. Regarding contract terms, the vendor includes "Exhibit C" in their contract, in which the City can insert the terms and conditions that are vital to Watertown. The Committee also discussed whether the Fire Department currently

utilizes drone technology and expressed interest in learning more about its existing program and how the two departments might coordinate their use of drones.

The financial aspects of the proposal were also reviewed. Chief Hanrahan stated that the drone would be purchased using drug forfeiture funds rather than local tax revenue. The Committee discussed the estimated one-time purchase cost of approximately \$24,000, annual software and service costs of approximately \$50,000, and the proposed one-year agreement with options to renew. The annual renewal rate is around \$50,000.

Throughout the discussion, Committee members and residents raised questions regarding transparency, data retention, potential mission creep, sharing of information with outside agencies, including federal agencies, and the need to establish clear performance measures to evaluate whether the program achieves its stated public safety objectives. Committee members emphasized the importance of balancing the operational benefits of the technology with appropriate safeguards protecting privacy and civil liberties.

The Committee identified several issues for further review prior to taking any action on the proposal, including:

- Review of the forthcoming ACLU guidance concerning police drone programs,
- Additional discussion with the Fire Department regarding its current drone usage,
- Development of measurable performance indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, and
- Consideration of the frequency with which the Committee should receive updates following implementation, should the program move forward.

At the conclusion of the discussion, Councilor Izzo moved to continue the matter to a future meeting. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair Piccirilli and passed unanimously by a vote of 3-0.

The meeting concluded at 8:35pm. Report prepared by Emily Izzo.

Watertown Police Department



Watertown Police First Responder Drone Program

Public safety tool. Clear guardrails. Operational flexibility.

GOAL

- IMPROVE FIRST RESPONDER SAFETY
- IMPROVE SERVICES TO THE COMMUNITY

This is not a surveillance program.

It is a public safety response tool.

Faster

information during active
incidents

Better

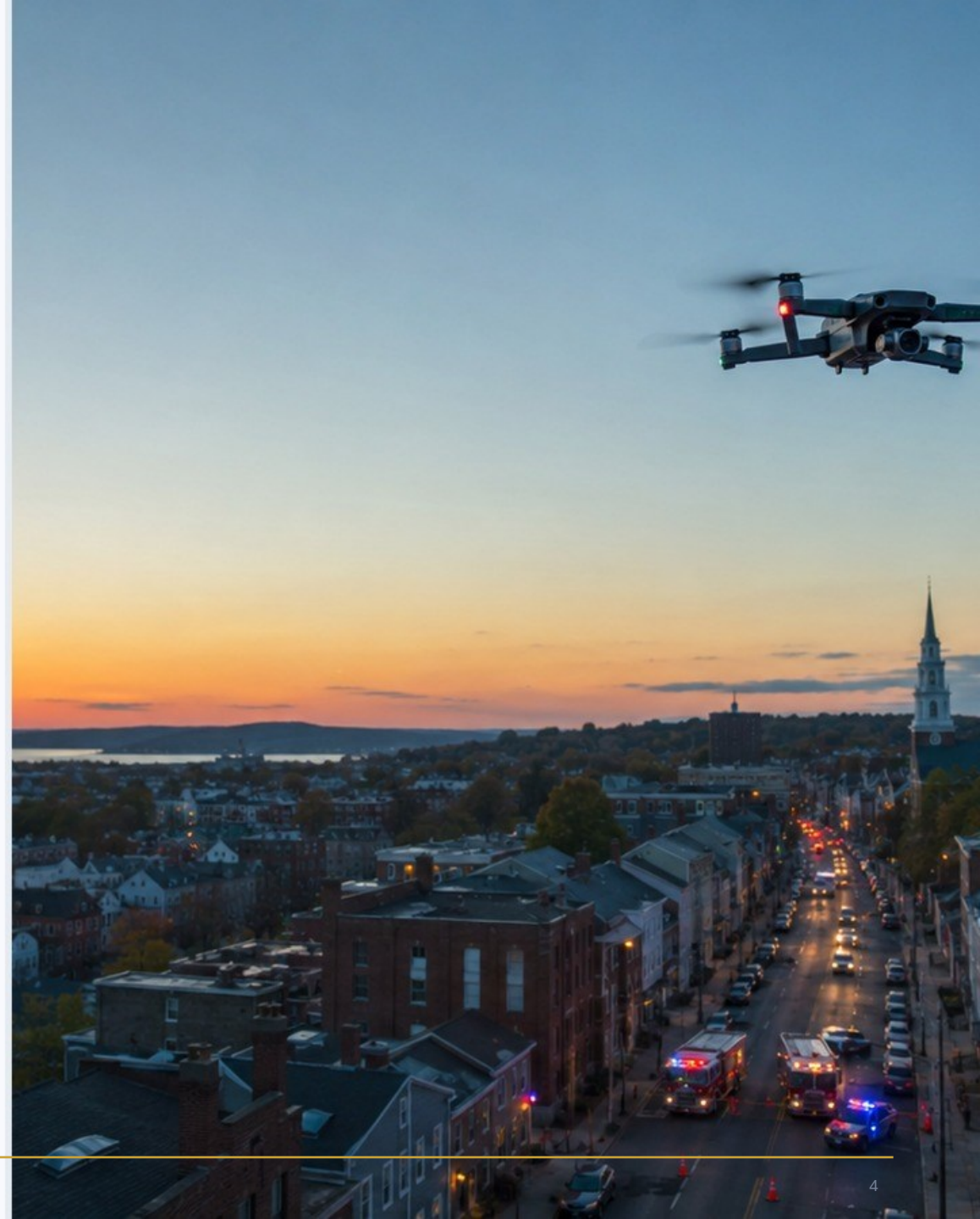
decisions by police, fire, EMS &
dispatch

Safer

outcomes for residents and
responders

Why This Matters

- The **first few minutes** often shape the outcome.
- A drone can get **eyes on a scene before officers arrive.**
- Early aerial information can **reduce guesswork, over-response, and unnecessary contact/interactions.**
- It can help determine whether to slow down, stage, call Fire/EMS, contain, or clear.



Public Safety Uses

Missing / endangered persons

Search & rescue, vulnerable residents, children, dementia cases

Crashes, fires & hazards

Traffic closures, fire spread, hazmat, blocked access

Active threats & serious calls

Safer staging, containment, locate fleeing or hiding suspects

Scene documentation

Crash reconstruction, crime scenes, official aerial perspective

Medical support

Locate patient, assess scene safety, guide responders

Training & readiness

Keep pilots current and safe under FAA / policy rules



Why It Can Be Less Intrusive

- A limited aerial view can **reduce unnecessary ground searches.**
- It may **avoid** officers **entering yards, knocking on multiple doors,** or **flooding an area with personnel.**
- It can help officers **slow down** and **avoid escalating** when the scene is not as reported.
- The goal is **better information** with **less disruption.**



Guardrails Already in the Works

Operational controls

- Trained and authorized personnel only
FAA / COA / Part 107 compliance
- **Supervisory approval** and pilot safety authority
- All use if documented – **transparency portal**
- Warrant required where law requires it, unless exigent circumstances apply

Clear prohibitions

- No random surveillance
- No targeting protected classes
- No harassment, intimidation, discrimination, or personal use
- No weaponization
- No civil ICE enforcement

Why Flexibility Matters

Guardrails should be stable. Procedures must be adaptable.

Real calls do not fit neat categories

Weather, location, threat, airspace, staffing, and call details change quickly.

We will learn from actual use

Some uses will be more valuable than expected; others may be limited.

Policy must evolve safely

FAA rules, vendor systems, training, and operating procedures will change.

Reported Resident Concerns:

Mission creep	Use written limits, logging, transparency, periodic review.
Protests / events	No political monitoring. Use only for genuine public safety incidents.
Mental health calls	Not because of mental illness alone. Use only where risk, location, search, or safety justifies it.
In-Transit recording	No intentional transit surveillance; minimize incidental capture and restrict use.
Outside sharing	No routine outside access; share only for lawful public safety or legal reasons.
Data retention	Limit non-evidentiary retention; preserve evidence, legal holds, training, accountability.

Implementation plan

**Start carefully. Be transparent. Keep clear limits.
Preserve operational flexibility.**

"Let us evaluate actual use, not just hypothetical misuse."

Hello,

My name is Madeleine and I have lived in Watertown for several years. I am writing to express my concern and share that I do not support WPD's proposed purchase and use of a Paladin drone. These sort of police "toys" do nothing to make people in Watertown, or anywhere, safer and they gravely risk people's right to privacy. And in an era of rapidly expanding state surveillance infrastructure and state violence towards vulnerable people, it is dangerous to support and invest in surveillance tools such as this drone. I urge the city council committee to listen to constituents' calls to oppose WPD's use and purchase of this drone.

Thank you.

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Dear City Council,

We concerned residents are writing of the meeting on July 9th regarding the Police Department's proposed Paladin drone procurement. We think there are still some things to explore and consider before WPD potentially buys a drone.

We think there are very valid uses of drones in an emergency response context, but it is important to keep in mind the potential for mission creep once you have purchased this technology. For example, without restrictions, it's very easy for a drone to become a general purpose mass surveillance tool, which probably many residents would not appreciate.

First, there are some questions the Committee should ask of themselves and the police

Questions

1. Should we allow Watertown police to use drones to surveil large events? [BPD](#) recently deployed dozens of drones to surveil local festivals. However, the presence of police drones and peaceful events can cause tension between the residents and the police. In particular, drone presence in politically charged events like peaceful protests could endanger activists should their information be leaked.

2. Will Watertown PD be sharing this single drone with other PD or borrowing drones from other departments (potentially from different vendors)?
3. Will there be a periodic evaluation of the efficacy of the drone? What is the rubric for a successful use of the drone that Watertown PD could not have accomplished in another way?
4. What are the “red lines” and how will the drone technology be rescinded should it no longer service the public?

We would ask the Council collaborate with local committees to **draft an SOP** and includes at a minimum:

- **Permitted uses:** For example, accident and fire response, environmental hazards, searches for missing persons, terrorist incidents -> probably don't need a warrant.
- **Prohibited uses:** For example, surveillance of protests, demonstrations, or their parking and staging areas. 911 calls that are primarily a mental health crisis. Personal use.
- **Warrant requirement:** For any use that is not a genuine emergency, with exigent-circumstance uses reported to the Council within a set number of days.
- **No incidental/in-transit surveillance:** An auditable guarantee that the drone records only at its destination and not while traveling to a scene.
- **Data retention:** How long footage is kept, who may access it, and an explicit prohibition on sharing with outside agencies or fusion centers absent a warrant or legal mandate.
- **Weaponization:** An absolute prohibition on weaponization of any kind.
- **Enforcement:** How will the commitment to the SOP be enforced? Who will audit the drone records periodically to ensure the drone isn't misused?

For additional reading

Cambridge last year debated on the use of drones for their police department. ([Cambridge Day](#)) The matter is currently still working through the committees as policies need to be written.

Cambridge has a [Surveillance Technology](#) ordinance to regulate the use of surveillance technology acquisition which requires a surveillance tech impact report (STIR) for each new technology. Watertown should consider such an ordinance in the future.

There's a (pretty much dead) house bill that has some language on police use of drones that has informed some of this email. ([H.4546](#), relevant text below)

“...use of UASs or UAVs by law enforcement for observational or surveillance purposes is permitted:

- (i) if the law enforcement agency first obtains a search warrant authorizing the use of a UAS or UAV;

- (ii) to counter the risk of a terrorist incident if the United States Secretary for Homeland Security or the Secretary of the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security determines credible intelligence exists indicating the risk of a terrorist incident;

- (iii) if the law enforcement agency possesses reasonable suspicion under the circumstances that use of a UAS or UAV is necessary to prevent imminent danger to life, to conduct a pursuit of an escapee or suspect, or to facilitate a search for a missing person; or

- (iv) to document a crime scene or crash scene for investigative, evidentiary, or crash reconstruction purposes.

- (f)(1) Notwithstanding any general or special law or regulation to the contrary, a law enforcement agency in possession of images, footage, data, or recordings captured from the use of a UAS or UAV shall permanently erase or destroy or cause to be destroyed all images, footage, data, or recordings captured from a UAS or UAV not later than 120 days following the date on which the images, footage, data, or recordings were captured.

- (2) The law enforcement agency may retain said UAS or UAV images, footage, data, or recordings beyond 120 days if such information contains evidence of a crime or is relevant to an ongoing investigation or judicial proceeding.

- (g) If any part of this section is for any reason held to be unconstitutional, preempted, or invalid, such decision shall not affect the remainder of this section.”

Thanks for listening! :)

-Lei & Brenten

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Hello,

My name is Madeline Nicole, and I am a Watertown resident. I am writing to express concern about the \$50,000 Paladin drone that the Watertown Police Department is hoping to purchase. The Watertown community has already expressed deep opposition to the expansion of surveillance infrastructure in Watertown, as we saw earlier this year when the WPD tried to install Flock cameras. While Flock had a particularly horrendous slew of PR nightmares to draw on, it remains true that the root of the concern with Flock was an erosion of privacy and an increase in state-run surveillance. Chief Hanrahan and other officers who spoke earlier this year at the “Tech Talk” about Flock cameras and other police technology demonstrated to the public that they had not done their research before asking to purchase the Flock cameras. Chief Hanrahan also responded to the numerous news stories and reports about the dangers of Flock by doubling down on his confidence in the technology, instead of listening to his constituents. I do not see a reason to trust that there was any more of a vigorous research process into this Paladin drone, and I also do not trust that the WPD understands the dangers of bolstering state surveillance infrastructure in a time when many people across the country are being targeted because of their political beliefs, immigration status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. Also, spending nearly \$50,000 for a device that would increase response time by 2 minutes, in a city where most incidents that police respond to are related to larceny from the Arsenal Mall, does not seem like a good use of tax dollars. Public safety comes from citizens having their basic needs met and from neighbors getting to know neighbors. I would much rather see money go towards, for example, keeping the library open for extended hours during a heat emergency like we saw last week. I do not support any tax dollars being spent on the expansion of state surveillance infrastructure like a Paladin drone.

Thank you.

Madeline Nicole

Watertown, MA