

**Ahern says drones would be used to find 'lost seniors'**

***By Amy Sylvestri***

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The sheriff's department wants to use surveillance drones to monitor Alameda County, but dozens of protesters at last week's Alameda County Board of Supervisors special meeting spoke out against the plan.

Representatives from the sheriff's department outlined their plans to use two surveillance drones to roam the skies spotting crime, but representatives from the ACLU and other citizens opposed the idea.

The 2-foot-long drones the county is thinking about purchasing resemble the drones of the insect world, with spindly legs and a small tapered body that supports a camera.

“It’s like something out of science fiction, it’s Big Brother,” said Martin Serzon as he waited to get into the meeting along with dozens people with bright orange and green “no drone” stickers on their shirts.

Alameda County Sheriff Greg Ahern told the crowd that his department is looking to buy two of the “small unmanned aerial systems”

The drones cost \$50,000 each and the money would come from a Department of Homeland Security grant as well as the sheriff’s department’s budget.

Ahern said the drones would be used for crime spotting and public safety – such as finding lost seniors. He said the drones would not be used to spy on people not involved in a crime or an emergency.

“We don’t ever want to breach privacy,” Ahern said.

Under the guidelines the sheriff’s department has proposed for using the drones, they say “Operators will take steps to ensure the camera is focused on the areas necessary to the mission and to minimize the inadvertent collection of data about uninvolved persons or places.”

As defined by the sheriff’s department, the “authorized missions” for the drones are wide-ranging, including any case where there is probable cause to believe the drone will record images of any person, place, or thing relevant to a felony investigation.

Other authorized uses of the drones would be by request of the fire department, in response to a hazardous material spill or natural disaster, and in hostage situations.

The three-hour meeting was a public forum without the entire Board of Supervisors, so no vote was taken on approving the use of the drones. The use of the drones would also have to be approved by the Federal Aviation Administration before being used.

Ahern emphasized that the drones would be unarmed, but a public speaker said that getting the drones in the air in any form was what was worrying him, because once they are operational, they could be modified easily.

One man echoed what was said in San Leandro last fall when it came out that the San Leandro police were storing photos of citizens taken by a license plate-scanning patrol car.

“You are asking us to trust you (the police), at the same time you are saying that you don’t trust us,” he said.