

February 7, 2026

The Honorable Members of the Maryland House of Delegates
Maryland General Assembly
Annapolis, Maryland

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee and House of Delegates,

I write in strong opposition to House Bill 471 (HB471) – Public Safety – State and Local Governments – Use of Unmanned Aircraft.

HB471 is overly broad and includes prohibitions that would unintentionally but significantly harm critical public safety, emergency management, and public service operations across the State of Maryland.

HB471 would restrict state agencies and local jurisdictions from deploying or operating unmanned aircraft for “surveillance, evidence collection, or any other purpose,” except under narrow circumstances largely limited to law enforcement activities such as warrant service or fresh pursuit. These restrictions would severely impair non-law-enforcement public aircraft operators whose missions are centered on life safety, infrastructure protection, emergency preparedness, and disaster response.

Public aircraft operators such as emergency management agencies, fire departments, environmental health programs, transportation and facilities agencies, and public universities increasingly rely on unmanned aircraft for situational awareness and safety-focused missions. These missions include post-disaster damage assessments, hazardous materials monitoring, fire scene assessment, flood and storm response, infrastructure inspections, missing person searches, and emergency planning. These uses are not investigative in nature, are not conducted for evidence collection, and are not intended to surveil individuals — yet HB471 would effectively prohibit them.

Of particular concern is the impact on programs that are expressly not law enforcement. For example, public university emergency management and facilities drone programs support safety, resilience, and post-disaster recovery by providing rapid aerial assessment of buildings, utilities, and campus conditions during and after emergencies. HB471 would eliminate these capabilities at the exact moments they are most needed — when time, safety, and informed decision-making are critical. The bill restricts the use of data collected by unmanned aircraft, even when lawfully and responsibly gathered for public safety or operational purposes. This would undermine transparency and good governance.

Maryland public aircraft operators already function under a robust federal regulatory framework administered by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which governs safety, airspace access, pilot certification, and operational authorization. Many agencies also adopt formal privacy policies, public transparency measures, and strict data retention limits. HB471 would create a redundant and conflicting state-level prohibition that disregards these safeguards and stifles responsible innovation.

Ultimately, HB471 would make Maryland less prepared, less resilient, and less capable of protecting its residents during emergencies. It would eliminate valuable tools from non-law-enforcement professionals whose mission is to save lives, protect infrastructure, and support communities — not to conduct surveillance.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the General Assembly to oppose HB471 in its current form and instead pursue balanced policy solutions that protect privacy while preserving the ability of state and local agencies, including non-law-enforcement entities, to responsibly use unmanned aircraft in service of public safety and the public good.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Stanton", written in a cursive style.

Christopher Stanton