



State of Maryland
Department of State Police
Government Affairs Unit
Annapolis Office (410) 260-6100

POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

DATE: February 24, 2026

BILL NUMBER: House Bill 471 **POSITION:** Letter of Concern

BILL TITLE: Public Safety – State and Local Governments – Use of Unmanned Aircraft

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

This legislation seeks to prohibit the state or a political subdivision of the state from deploying or operating unmanned aircraft (drone) for surveillance, evidence collection, or any other purpose unless they have a warrant, performing search and rescue, in fresh pursuit or to locate an escaped prisoner. The bill also exempts use of an unmanned aircraft to counter the risk of a terrorist threat. Any evidence obtained outside of the prescribed exceptions is inadmissible in any trial.

Under current law, all drone operators in the state of Maryland must complete an Airspace Authorization Application with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) at least 60 days prior to the proposed operation date. Whether you're a public safety drone operator, certificated remote pilot, or model aircraft flyer, drone safety is the law.

The Maryland Department of State Police (MDSP) has a unit within our Aviation Command that is responsible for the use and tracking of unmanned aircraft (drone) used by MSP personnel. This unit has trained drone operators and aircraft registered with the FAA. Both our aviation personnel and Crash team are trained and registered to operate unmanned aircraft (drone).

Unmanned aircraft or drones are used for the purpose of examining crash scenes, arson/fire/explosives scenes, crime scenes, statewide tragedy/emergencies, and overwatch for presidential or gubernatorial events. Drones are being used during both MDSP and OSFM calls for service as an essential tool. Drones are used to photograph serious motor vehicle accidents as well as provide measurements of the scene and key markers to determine cause and effect. Drones offer an aerial bird's eye view for investigators at a much lower cost than using a helicopter.

House Bill 471 would negatively impact our ability to provide aerial support at fire and explosive/IED scenes and all statewide emergencies. The drone is often sent into a fire scene first to determine if it is safe for arson investigators to enter the building. Drones are often used to photograph the scene and provide guidance to investigators. In IED threats, a drone is used to confirm location and if there are other safety factors before a bomb robot and explosives expert are sent into the active scene. Ultimately, every photograph, measurement, or video taken by a drone could be considered evidence for the purposes of this legislation.

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Most importantly, drones were used by the state when the Key bridge collapsed. If this bill were in effect, once the search and rescue changed to recovery, the drones would have to be pulled back without appropriate warrants. However, drones were used throughout the event to monitor the bridge and other vehicles moving around the scene. Drones were also used to measure any movement of the bridge debris and the ship. Interestingly, the Attorney General is expected to be involved in lawsuits over the collapse of the Key bridge. This bill prohibits the use of any photos or other “evidence” gathered by a drone in any criminal, civil or administrative trial.

House Bill 471 effectively shuts down 90% of our drone program which would increase investigative cost, require additional manpower and overtime to complete tasks, as well as negatively impact the public’s safety.

For these reasons, the Maryland Department of State Police urges the Committee to give House Bill 471 an unfavorable report.