



ACTION CALENDAR

November 18, 2025

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Taplin (author), Councilmember Kesarwani (co-sponsor), and Councilmember Humbert (co-sponsor)

Subject: Unmanned Aerial Systems and Drones as First Responders

RECOMMENDATION

Refer to the City Manager the initiation of the process outlined by BMC 2.99: Surveillance Technology Ordinance (STO) for the Berkeley Police Department (BPD) to acquire and use Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), including Drones as First Responders (DFR), consistent with all auditing, transparency, data and privacy protections required for all use policies and acquisition reports under the STO.

POLICY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

On October 16, 2025 the Public Safety Committee adopted the following action: M/S/C (Kesarwani/O’Keefe) to send the item with a positive recommendation to Council.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

The City of Berkeley, like many municipalities, is navigating the dual challenge of increasing public safety demands and constrained departmental resources. At the same time, the public expects rapid, transparent, and equitable responses to emergencies, complex incidents, and quality-of-life issues.

In this context, Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and Drones as First Responders (DFR) are emerging as tools with the potential to significantly enhance public safety operations, emergency response capabilities, and resource efficiency. Many jurisdictions—including San Francisco, Richmond, Santa Monica, and Alameda County—have implemented such programs to reduce response times, improve situational awareness, and increase officer and community safety.

In 2023, BPD completed an STO process, allowing requests for drone mutual aid from other agencies. Those deployments have successfully protected the lives of community members, suspects, and officers. However, reliance on outside agencies restricts availability, creates unpredictable costs, and prevents the development of a DFR program. To realize the full benefits of drone technology, Berkeley should move toward acquiring its own systems.

As interest in UAS and DFR capabilities grows—particularly for applications such as search and rescue, disaster response, and crime scene documentation—it is critical that Berkeley move proactively, ensuring any exploration or potential implementation is rooted in community values, transparency, and civil liberties.

BACKGROUND

Across California and the United States, local governments and public safety agencies are adopting Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and Drones as First Responders (DFR) to address evolving operational challenges. These technologies are increasingly viewed as critical tools for supporting effective, timely, and equitable emergency response, especially in cities facing staff shortages, high service demands, and climate-related emergencies.

UAS are remotely piloted aircraft systems typically operated by trained personnel during active incidents to support operations such as search and rescue, missing persons cases, traffic collision investigations, and crime scene documentation. More advanced models of deployment—such as DFR—enable drones to be autonomously dispatched from pre-positioned locations in response to 911 calls, often arriving before human responders and streaming live video to dispatch and field units. This real-time aerial intelligence can help prevent unnecessary use of force, support de-escalation, and reduce officer risk.

Peer jurisdictions—including San Francisco, Richmond, Santa Monica, and Alameda County—have implemented drone programs to enhance operational capacity while maintaining strong public accountability. This referral authorizes the City Manager to evaluate the feasibility of a drone program to assess its technical, legal, and financial dimensions, as well as its potential benefits and risks in Berkeley. Early conversations have identified applications for multiple City departments, including disaster response, infrastructure inspection, and environmental monitoring.

Establishing a citywide UAS program is a proactive step that allows Berkeley to thoughtfully assess whether, how, and under what conditions such technology may be used.

RATIONALE

The development of a citywide Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) Use Policy is both a timely and necessary step for ensuring that emerging public safety technologies are evaluated through the lens of transparency, equity, and community oversight.

As the capabilities of drones continue to evolve and their adoption by peer cities increases, Berkeley has the opportunity to proactively shape policy rather than react to technological change. Establishing a thoughtful, community-informed framework ensures that any future deployment of drones—whether by the Police Department, Fire Department, or other City divisions—aligns with Berkeley’s values of racial justice, civil liberties, and environmental responsibility.

Drone technologies can provide clear benefits: faster and safer emergency response, improved situational awareness, enhanced de-escalation, and more efficient allocation of limited personnel.

They can also support climate resiliency and disaster preparedness by enabling real-time damage assessments and safe inspections of inaccessible infrastructure.

However, these tools are not without risk. Improper or unregulated use could lead to violations of privacy, disproportionate surveillance of marginalized communities, disruption to wildlife, or erosion of public trust. A UAS Use Policy must therefore include robust safeguards consistent with the STO: clear delineation of use, accountability mechanisms, transparency in flight activity, and annual reporting on impacts and outcomes.

In authorizing the City Manager to lead this policy development process, the City Council ensures that the exploration of drone programs proceeds deliberatively, inclusively, and under public oversight. Guided by the STO, this referral lays the groundwork for a policy that is not only operationally effective but also democratically legitimate and reflective of the needs and rights of Berkeley residents. Submitting a UAS acquisition report and use policy will support informed, collaborative, and accountable exploration of this technology across departments, and ensure that any deployment aligns with Berkeley's commitment to public trust, environmental stewardship, and racial and social equity.

As outlined in the STO, the use policy, and acquisition report shall include:

- An interdepartmental assessment of potential operational uses by public safety and non-public safety departments;
- Consideration of technical requirements, legal and regulatory frameworks, civil liberties and privacy protections, and equity implications;
- Community engagement and best practices for transparency and accountability.
- Updates on training and data handling procedures.
- A requirement for annual public reports detailing:
 - instances of drone deployment;
 - departmental uses and impacts on operations;
 - community outcomes;
 - compliance audits.

FISCAL IMPACTS

Staff time will be required for the coordination and completion of the policy development and reporting framework. Any future proposals for equipment procurement, pilot programs, or department-level deployment would be subject to separate City Council review and approval, including full fiscal analysis at that stage.

The current referral does not refer funding for the procurement or implementation of any UAS or DFR system. It initiates a policy development process, which may be supported by existing department resources and informed by peer city frameworks.

Staff may also explore the availability of state, to support policy infrastructure development related to drone oversight, civil liberties protections, or emergency preparedness

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The City could defer engagement with drone policy or allow departments to act independently without a unifying framework. However, this risks uncoordinated use, inconsistent standards, and diminished public trust. Proactively developing a citywide policy ensures consistent standards, transparency, and safeguards before any implementation occurs.

CONTACT PERSON

Councilmember Taplin Council District 2 510-981-7120