

# Airport looks at drone safety

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MT. VERNON — The Mt. Vernon Airport Authority plans to host a drone safety meeting next month.

The goal is to make sure drone operators, helicopter pilots and others are aware of the safety regulations for drones so no problems arise, said Airport Director Chris Collins.

"There has not been a problem yet but it's time that we probably ought to all talk," Collins said, later adding, "We just want to get out ahead of things."

The drone issue was raised at Tuesday's meeting of the MVAA Board of Commissioners.

Commissioner Marty Cox, who teaches a drone class at Rend Lake College, said drones are becoming more prevalent in this area and many operators

may not be aware of all the safety guidelines.

"It's going to keep getting bigger and bigger with the number of drones and it's unbelievable how many people have no idea what the regulations are and that's why we're just wanting them to be aware," Cox said. "We don't want to have a problem."

The maximum altitude drones are allowed to fly is 400 feet above ground. That is to avoid any contact with traditional aircraft which are not supposed to fly lower than 500 feet except when landing, Cox said.

The potential problem lies with helicopters which fly lower to begin with, Cox said. For example, Air Evac medical helicopters are typically flown at 300 feet when approaching hospitals or an accident scene, officials said.

The public is prohibited from operating

drones close to the airport. However, they can operate drones, if they get permission, in the Class E Airspace within five miles of the airport.

"I do get a lot of phone calls about it," Collins said of drones. "It's kind of unfair for me or us to be the policemen of the Class E Airspace. Many people think, 'well if it's around the airport ... we could be aware of the flight.'"

Collins said more helicopters are taking to the sky locally, which makes drone safety a real concern.

"The problem being is that we have two hospitals with active heliports and now a new Harley-Davidson dealer that flies helicopters and so it's not as simple as calling the airport director anymore and saying, 'hey I'm going to be up,'" Collins said. "I can't speak for the hospital heliports or the Harley-Davidson dealer so that's why we

need to have a meeting where we all come together."

A firm date has not yet been set for the drone safety meeting but it will likely be in early December.

Drone operators, Air Evac pilots, hospital officials and representatives of Roadhouse Harley-Davidson will be among those invited to the session. The meeting will also be open to anyone who owns a drone or who is interested in them. Those who attend may exchange contact information, Collins said.

Commissioner Ryan Wellmaker said the meeting is a great idea.

"It's interesting because more and more drones are coming on the market," Wellmaker said. "I agree with you that there needs to be some type of public knowledge session or session pertaining to drones. ... You can buy them so readily."