

# New drone adds search and rescue capabilities

By JADE MCDOWELL  
STAFF WRITER

The next person who gets lost or stranded in Umatilla County could get help from the SARbot.

Umatilla County Emergency Management's new \$25,000 unmanned aerial vehicle is its most technologically advanced yet, sporting capabilities such as infrared imaging and the ability to carry a few pounds of food or medical supplies to a stranded person waiting for rescue.

"I personally think this is going to be one of the premier drones in emergency management this side of the state, at least for a while," emergency manager Tom Roberts said.

The county has used smaller, lesser-equipped drones in the past for search and rescue missions, fugitive hunts, and reconnaissance during disasters such as wildfires and hazardous material spills.

When the Tillicum Inn in Umatilla caught fire a little over a year ago, firefighters were able to scope out the situation on the roof using a UAV. Another time the gadget went into the air to help search for a missing 13-year-old girl near Tollgate.

The new, larger orange and black quadcopter will improve the county's capabilities. Operators can bring up a feed from the regular camera (with extra zoom capabilities) or a forward-looking infrared (FLIR) camera providing thermal imaging. Roberts said the FLIR camera would have come in particularly handy recently when Morrow County deputies spent four hours searching for a crash victim who fled the scene, wading through knee-high snow and freez-



Umatilla County emergency manager Thomas Roberts, right, talks to BMCC sophomore Adam Shodin about the county's new unmanned aerial system, an Aerial Technology International EMBot, at a job fair Wednesday on the BMCC campus in Pendleton.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

ing temperatures in the dark.

Equipment such as the cameras are removable, so the emergency management department or sheriff's deputies can interchange the technology with newer versions that come out or load up on additional accessories in the future.

"In terms of what we can do with it — no pun intended, but the sky's the limit," Roberts said.

During a search, the unmanned aerial vehicle can be automated to thoroughly and efficiently search every foot of an area with cliffs,

ravines or other challenges for rescuers on foot. Images can be broadcast to multiple screens, from phones of rescuers to a laptop at a command site. And while rescuers once managed to fly two candy bars to stranded bear hunters using a drone, the SARbot will be able to carry a few pounds' worth of food, medical supplies, rope, communications equipment or other items if needed.

The drone was custom-designed and built by Lawrence Dennis. He founded ATI, a Port-

land-based company that provides "bots" for everything from stringing power lines to agricultural mapping, in 2012.

The SARbot (SAR stands for "search and rescue") was paid for by about \$15,000 from Oregon's Office of Emergency Management homeland security grant, and the Wildhorse Foundation pitched in about \$10,000 more to cover the remaining cost and a few accessories.

Dennis said it could probably carry 10 or more pounds if needed,

but he would recommend sticking to about three most of the time for optimal battery use and handling.

He said law enforcement agencies often come to him because commercial drones off the shelf just don't provide what they need for missions. ATI's practice of using a "configurable undercarriage" also helps UAVs last longer by requiring only one piece of the technology to be replaced when it's outdated.

"It's hard for people to keep up with the pace of how things go along," he said. "After a year or two they would find their drone was not supported anymore."

Five Umatilla County employees are trained to use the SARbot so far, something Dennis said is important. While someone driving a car for the first time might have a good idea of how components like the steering wheel and gear shift work, unmanned aerial vehicles are less familiar territory for most people.

A UAV is really only as good as its operator, Dennis said.

"A lot of people think the magic is in the drones, but it's not," he said.

Roberts said the county will continue to get people trained and licensed to operate the drone, and is looking for search and rescue volunteers who would be interested in getting trained as well.

Roberts debuted the new drone Wednesday afternoon at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton during a law enforcement-themed career fair. Students were drawn to the display of UAV technology Roberts had spread out, and asked questions about how easy the drones were to operate.

## Blue Mountain Community College holds off tuition hike

By PHIL WRIGHT  
STAFF WRITER

Blue Mountain Community College will not increase its tuition for the first time in 23 years while facing a \$1.8 million budget shortfall.

Casey White-Zollman, vice president of public relations for the college, said the BMCC Board of Education on March 13 voted unanimously against raising tuition for the 2019-20 academic year to keep the college affordable.

"The decision did not come lightly," according to a written statement from White-Zollman. "The board considered survey feedback from students, as well as recommendations from a campus-wide budget committee, before coming to a resolution."

The college has about 7,400 students in all. While setting the 2018-19 tuition last year, according to White-Zollman, students told the board they were at the point of choosing between their education and basic needs. BMCC has the highest tuition and fees for the 17 community colleges in Oregon following a 12 percent increase over the past two academic years.

Blue Mountain charges



BMCC Board of Education member Jane Hill testifies before the Joint Committee on Ways and Means speaking about community college funding levels on Friday at BMCC in Pendleton.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

\$108 per credit for residents of Oregon and border states plus various class fees. According to Oregon community college data, going to BMCC for the 2018-19 school year costs \$6,188, not including books and supplies. The average annual in-state tuition for community colleges is \$5,399 and out-of-state is \$10,058. The in-state average increased \$227 from the previous school year while the out-of-state average bumped up \$64.

"The college has been conservative in planning and budgeting," White-Zollman said, but that has not

been enough to offset the rising costs of employees,

complying with state and federal unfunded mandates and paying into Oregon's Public Employee Retirement System. PERS in particular, she said, is going to hit BMCC hard next year.

The state in the past provided approximately one-third of the college's operating costs, White-Zollman explained, with another one-third from tuition and one-third from local taxes. Now, BMCC receives 28 percent from the state, 32 percent from property taxes, and 5 percent from other resources. The largest chunk — 35 percent — comes from tuition, meaning students shoulder most of the costs.

The state allocated

\$579 million for the 17 community colleges, but White-Zollman said the actual cost of running the colleges is \$647 million.

"That is what we need to keep things as is," she said.

Gov. Kate Brown's budget proposal cuts community college funding to \$543 million, while the Legislature's Ways and Means Committee proposed \$590.7 million for the colleges.

"BMCC and other community colleges are budgeting at the \$590 million mark," she said.

And that's a bit of a crap shoot. The colleges have to set their budgets in May, while the Legislature does not finish with the state's budget until July.

Based on the Legislature's proposal, BMCC faces a \$1.8 million gap between resources and costs.

Rather than increase prices, White-Zollman said, the board chose to use \$1.8 million in reserves and will take the next year along with incoming president Dennis Bailey to restructure how the college delivers education at a cost students can afford. The reserve fund has enough to sustain the college for a few years, she said, but by 2022 that plan would run into trouble.

"The board believes it's time for the state to adequately fund community college education," White-Zollman said.

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