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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FAA deems Flagler County UAS Program a ‘Public Aircraft Operator’ for the benefit of public safety

April 26, 2024 – The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) granted Flagler County’s UAS (unmanned aircraft systems, or drones) Program a “Certificate of Waiver or Authorization (COA),” thus making it a “public aircraft operator” for the benefit of public safety versus a “commercial entity operator.”

“This COA allows us to operate outside of Part 107 (commercial drone pilot licensure),” said UAS Program Coordinator Bruno Luna. “This will allow us to better document and respond to emergency events like hurricanes, fires, as well as search and rescue missions, while also potentially making it easier for us to secure other waivers and airspace authorizations in the future.”

The application for the COA required Flagler County to establish that it has standard operating procedures within its UAS Flight Operations Policy Manual and its UAS Flight Operations Training Manual that are consistent with state and federal law. It also had to attest that the UAS Program is for the public interest utilizing its own “public aircraft” that are not used for commercial purposes.

“The UAS team has the discretion to operate under either the COA or part 107 regulations, as each one entails distinct operational requirements,” Luna said. “It’s worth noting that while part 107 regulations permit compensation, the COA does not.”

Current FAA regulations restrict all commercial drone operations to under 400 feet. The county intends to apply for a waiver that would allow it to operate up to 600 feet, as well as a waiver for Beyond the Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) operations that will facilitate long range missions that can cover our entire coastline.

“We have been working with the Engineering Department to document the ‘near shore hard bottom rock’ within the area of the Hammock for future dune restoration,” Luna said. “This near shore hard bottom rock is a habitat for marine life, so you can’t necessarily just top it with sand. We are trying to pinpoint where it exists and how extensive it is.”

Andy Dance
District 1

Greg Hansen
District 2

David Sullivan
District 3

Leann Pennington
District 4

Donald O’Brien, Jr.
District 5

Expanded abilities would also allow Flagler County to use its newest fixed-wing drone – complete with a detect-and-avoid system and lidar – to measure sand shifts or losses more efficiently after weather events like nor’easters and hurricanes.

“Flying higher means each image (one per second) captures a larger area and is a smoother process when the software stitches them together. After Hurricane Ian and Hurricane Nicole, we mapped the coastline and it took six or seven days,” Luna said. “Ideally, we would like to do that in one day because things can change quickly on the ground after a hurricane.”

These considerations are especially important, for example, when the county needs documentation to apply for disaster reimbursements.

“This is one example of how forward leaning our departments are,” said County Administrator Heidi Petito. “Innovative Technology, which our drone team operates under, continually pursues ways to better serve our residents, the community, and the entire region with the technology it employs.”

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