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OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS WEEKEND

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Saturday, April 25, 2026

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AUBURN TO USE DRONES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS



PROVIDED BY SKYDIO

Auburn Public Safety will begin using Skydio drones for first responder services.

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The Auburn City Council approved a 6-year contract with Axon Enterprise, Inc. to purchase four drones for the Auburn Police Department to use for first-responder services during its regular Tuesday meeting.

The contract costs \$89,782 for the first year and \$180,543 per year, totaling \$992,501.

In 2021, Auburn police entered an agreement with Axon Enterprise to provide a suite of equipment, including one of its latest technologies, "Drone as a First Responder" named Skydio, according to the council packet.

"Skydio offers semi-autonomous drones that will respond to calls within the pre-defined operational area to provide field units with critical pre-arrival information on the situation to which they are responding," the packet said.

"Public Safety, as one of our tenants, constantly looks at technology improvements

to help with efficiency and effectiveness and service, and the police department is aggressive in that endeavor," said Auburn Public Safety Director William A. Mathews Jr.

Mathews said they started looking at Drone as a First Responder about two years ago when it was new, and since then, it has developed in its abilities and is "a lot more prevalent across the country."

In a presentation shown to the city council, highlights of Skydio include pilot controls as needed on scene, arriving on scene before dispatched units, video evidence to assist with investigations, thermal video technology to assist with fire scenes, multiple pods that provide maximized coverage, and more.

During the meeting, Auburn Public Safety proposed Skydio's coverage area: Two docks at the Public Safety Building on North Ross Street and two docks at Water Resource Management on West Samford Avenue.

The area outlined by Opelika Road, Dean

Road and Moores Mill Road is exclusionary due to the airport. Mathews said Public Safety will have to call and get special permission if they need to fly a drone in that area.

Other council business

■ The Auburn City Council approved a special events alcohol license for Aramark Educational Services, LLC for an event at Plainsman Park.

■ The city council approved the 2025 Municipal Water Pollution Prevention Annual Report.

■ The city council approved an infrastructure development agreement with BC Stone Homes, LLC, for the Blackwood Grove development.

■ The city council accepted public utility easements for Allen Turner Automotive Holdings III Inc. at the property located at 2662 W. Pace Blvd.

Please see **RESPONDERS**, Page A2

Opelika City Schools announces new leaders for 2026-2027

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The Opelika City Schools Board of Education approved new district leaders and principals for the upcoming 2026-2027 school year.

Russ Hardwick will serve as deputy superintendent of operations. Brad Henderson will serve as director of technology. Montray Thompson will serve as the district's human resources director. Mary Salmon will serve as federal programs

coordinator. Zach Blatt will serve as principal of Southview Primary School, and Chris Hames will serve as principal of West Forest Intermediate School.

Hardwick currently serves as OCS' director of student services and previously served as the district's attendance, community affairs, and safety coordinator from 2022 to 2025, according to OCS.

Before moving into district-level leadership, Hardwick served as assistant principal at Opelika High School from 2008 to

2022. In his new role as deputy superintendent of operations, he will oversee district operations and continue supporting students, staff and schools across Opelika.

Henderson began serving as director of technology in April after returning to OCS, where he spent 20 years in technology positions, including network/system administrator and technician/webmaster.

Most recently, Henderson served as a system engineer at Auburn University. His background includes experience in systems

administration, infrastructure, cybersecurity and district technology support, OCS said.

Thompson is the current principal of South Girard School in Phenix City. OCS said he brings two decades of experience in education, serving as principal, assistant principal, special education coordinator, classroom teacher and district operations leader.

Please see **LEADERS**, Page A2

Weather

Not as warm; a p.m. t-storm
High 75 • Low 62
Forecast • A10

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Business	B5	Lively	D1	Puzzles	D2
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