



Representative Bernie Bunyan Willis

74th House District

H.B. 251 - Sponsor Testimony

May 20th, 2025

Vice Chair Daniels, Ranking Member Grim, and members of this distinguished transportation committee; thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on this important piece of legislation. As technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, it is essential that our legal and regulatory frameworks evolve alongside it to ensure both the protection of constitutional rights and the responsible adoption of emerging tools.

This bill takes a balanced and forward-looking approach to two key areas: the regulation of unmanned aerial vehicles—or UAVs—by law enforcement, and the modernization of Ohio's aviation infrastructure to meet the demands of a changing landscape in air mobility.

First, the legislation affirms the vital protections guaranteed under the Fourth Amendment by generally requiring law enforcement to obtain a search warrant before using UAVs for surveillance purposes. While current case law permits warrantless aerial observation by manned aircraft, UAVs pose distinct privacy risks because of their enhanced surveillance capabilities and operational flexibility. Our bill brings the use of UAVs into alignment with constitutional standards governing physical searches and ensures that any evidence obtained in violation of those standards will be inadmissible in court.

At the same time, we recognize the need for operational flexibility in emergency and urgent scenarios. For that reason, the bill allows for warrantless UAV use under a carefully defined set of exceptions, including:

- Border security operations within 50 miles of an international border;
- Exigent circumstances that require immediate action;
- Disaster response to environmental or weather emergencies;
- Traffic and accident investigations;
- Research, training, and development purposes.

To enhance transparency and public trust, the bill requires that all law enforcement UAV flights be documented and that those records be treated as public documents, subject to existing exemptions under the Ohio Public Records Law. Additionally, it explicitly prohibits the arming of UAVs with lethal weapons, underscoring our commitment to ensuring that emerging technologies are not used to militarize law enforcement.

Beyond UAV regulation, this legislation also incorporates key provisions from House Bill 477 of the 135th General Assembly, updating our state's Aeronautics Law. Specifically, it:

1. Defines and formally recognizes seaplane bases, heliports, vertiports, and spaceports as part of Ohio's aviation infrastructure;
2. Requires these facilities to obtain a certificate of approval from the Ohio Department of Transportation before being used for commercial purposes;
3. Extends the existing certification process for airports and landing areas to these newly defined facilities.

In sum, this bill represents a thoughtful and collaborative effort to modernize Ohio law. It respects constitutional principles while embracing innovation, and it ensures that our state is prepared for the future of air mobility—both in terms of oversight and infrastructure

This bill passed unanimously out of the House Aviation and Aerospace Committee last General Assembly and was a reflection of the hard work done for it throughout the term.

I respectfully ask for your support on this innovative legislation and I welcome any questions you may have.