

Firm proposes Taser-armed drones to stop school shootings

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This photo provided by Axon Enterprise depicts a conceptual design through a computer-generated rendering of a taser drone. Taser developer Axon says it is working to build drones armed with the electric stunning weapons that could fly in schools and “help prevent the next Uvalde, Sandy Hook, or Columbine.” But its own technology advisers quickly panned the idea as a dangerous fantasy.

Credit: Axon Enterprise, Inc. via AP

Taser developer Axon said this week it is working to build drones armed

with the electric stunning weapons that could fly in schools and "help prevent the next Uvalde, Sandy Hook, or Columbine." But its own technology advisers quickly panned the idea as a dangerous fantasy.

The publicly traded company, which sells Tasers and police body cameras, floated the idea of a new police drone product last year to its artificial intelligence ethics board, a group of well-respected experts in technology, policing and privacy.

Some of them expressed reservations about weaponizing drones in over-policed communities of color. But they were not expecting Axon's Thursday announcement that it wants to send those Taser-equipped drones into classrooms to prevent mass shootings by immobilizing an intruding gunman.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Axon founder and CEO Rick Smith said he felt compelled to make the idea public after the mass shooting at an Uvalde, Texas elementary school, saying he was "catastrophically disappointed" in the response by police who didn't move in to kill the suspect for more than an hour.

But he stressed Friday that no product had been launched and any potential launch would be down the road. The idea, he felt, needed to be shared now because of the public conversation about effective ways for police to safely confront attackers and how schools can increase safety.

"This is an idea that should get into the public's consciousness while our minds are open to it and I felt if I wait another six months, the world is going to change and people are going to forget this pain and we're going to see a shift in sentiments where people are going to focus a lot more on what could go wrong, rather than the pain of this problem we need to solve," he said.

Axon's stock price rose with the news. But the announcement angered members of the ethics board, some of whom are now likely to quit in protest.

"This particular idea is crackpot," said Barry Friedman, a New York University law professor who sits on the Axon AI Ethics Board. "Drones can't fly through closed doors. The physical properties of the universe still hold. So unless you have a drone in every single classroom in America, which seems insane, the idea just isn't going to work."

Friedman said it was a "dangerous and fantastical idea" that went far beyond the proposal for a Taser-equipped police drone that board members—some of them former or current police officials—had been debating in recent months.

"We begged the company not to do it," Friedman said of the company's announcement. "It was unnecessary and shameful."

The product idea had been kicked around at Axon since at least 2019 and the company has been working to try to figure out whether a drone with a Taser was even a feasible idea. Over the last year, the company created computer-generated art renderings to mock up a product design and conducted an internal test to see if Taser darts—which transmit an immobilizing electric jolt—could be fired from a flying drone, Smith said. He added that he had discussed the possibility of developing such a product with the ethics board.

Board members who spoke with The Associated Press said they were taken aback by the school drone proposal—which they got notice of only earlier this week—and cobbled together a unanimous statement of concern that described Axon's decision as "deeply regrettable." The company tweeted out the board's dissent shortly after its own statement Thursday announcement.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there were resignations," said another ethics board member, Ryan Calo, a law professor at the University of Washington. "I think everyone on the board has to make a choice about whether they want to stay involved."

Friedman and Calo both described this week's process as a sharp turnaround from the respectful relationship that Axon executives have had with the board in recent years on controversial topics such as face recognition—which Axon decided against using in its body cameras—and automated license plate readers.

"Sometimes the company takes our advice and sometimes it doesn't," Friedman said. "What's important is that happens after thoughtful discussion and coordination. That was thrown out the window here."

Smith said the company is still in the very early phases of product development and would continue to consult the ethics board, along with law enforcement officials, community leaders and school officials. He acknowledged that the company might later determine that the idea isn't feasible and abandon it.

But he took issue with the idea that he had ignored the concerns from the ethics board, which is meant to provide guidance and share feedback. Ultimately, the decision still falls to Smith as the company's chief executive.

"I have not ignored what they have said. People can have debates and disagree," Smith said. "I think there is one thing the world can see: our board is not a whitewash."

"I hope they don't resign," he added. "I hope that they are somewhat proud maybe after this that we're having this public debate."

On Friday in an ["Ask Me Anything" chat](#) on the online forum Reddit, Smith acknowledged that "drones in schools can sound nuts" but went on to answer detailed questions about them. They could travel through school vents, he said, and perch on doors and walls near ceilings. It could be a "good thing" if a gunman tried to shoot one down because it would distract from trying to kill people.

"We're doing this because we care," Smith said. "We're a business so ultimately we have to find a financial model that works, but at the end of the day we've been successful because our mission drives our business and we solve problems we care about," he added.

Smith told a Reddit user that Axon was "absolutely not" trying to capitalize on recent tragedies to attract investors. He noted the advisory board's disagreements but said the mass shooting in Uvalde, Texas—and what he described as misguided proposals to arm teachers with guns—compelled him to go public with the drone idea to field a "far broader array of voices."

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