

VPD to get armoured vehicle

The \$270,000 BearCat is needed for rescue operations, police say

The Vancouver police department expects to order an armoured rescue vehicle within a month, making it the first police force in Canada to own one of the \$270,000 BearCats.

The Vancouver Police Foundation raised more than \$200,000 last week at a retirement roast for former chief Jamie Graham to buy a BearCat.

"I'll sleep a lot easier once we have one in town," said Sgt. Norm Webster of the Vancouver Police Emergency Response Team, who has been campaigning for the BearCats for more than two years. "I'm hoping that we'd be able to place an order within a month."

But a criminologist said armoured vehicles may present the wrong image of the police.

The police foundation -- which raises funds for things like police training and equipment -- gave the 700 guests at the roast "Fund a BearCat" information forms, listing the highly mobile armoured truck's qualities, including "increased levels of safety during CBRNE [chemical, biological, radioactive, nuclear and explosive] incidents."

Ordinary police vehicles aren't built to withstand gunfire, Webster said, so police are vulnerable now during rescue operations.

In the past, Webster said he and his team have had to take off their body armour during a rescue mission and stuff it into their squad car windows for increased fortification. "One of the rounds from a hunting rifle would go right through [a patrol car]," said Webster. "It doesn't really provide any ballistic protection for our members."

By contrast, all six sides of the eight-ton BearCat are armoured, including the windows. Built on a commercial truck chassis, BearCats are easy to drive, Webster said, and at 2.5 metres wide they fit on most city roads.

They cost about \$68 to fuel up, Webster said, estimating annual operating cost to the city will be about \$4,000 each.

In addition to their swivel roof-top escape hatches -- which double as shields against gunfire -- the BearCats are equipped with anti-lock brakes, air-conditioning, cup holders and an AM-FM radio and CD player. There is enough seating for 10 people inside.

However, criminologist David MacAlister said Monday; such vehicles might not be good for public perception of the police force.

"No doubt devices like this are handy," said MacAlister, a professor at Simon Fraser University. "But personally, I think it's going down the wrong road. I think it's just the increased militarization of policing and taking police away from the close connection that they've had with the community historically."

Armoured trucks, he said, send out a strong message: "It's almost the antithesis of foot patrol and bike patrol and community policing stations.

"I don't think it does a whole lot in terms of fostering good police relations when the public starts to see the police, in essence, [as] an armoured force."

Len Light, president of Massachusetts-based Lenco Armored Vehicles, said he developed the BearCat in 2000 as a "defensive piece of equipment" after watching newscasts of police struggling to protect themselves and victims in a high school shooting.

"There were not a lot of vehicles that could defeat high-powered weapons," said Light.

More than 400 BearCat LE vehicles -- a version designed for law enforcement agencies, not the military -- are in use across the U.S., he said. New York's police department has four of them, while the Virginia State Police have seven.

"Police cars obviously are not bulletproof so police have been left out there," Light said. "Their technology hasn't kept up to the current crime situation."

Light said the BearCat is like a "bunker on wheels."

Options include a night-vision camera, under-body blast shielding to help protect against land mines and bombs, as well as radiation detection devices.

Police officers and the people they work to protect will be safer once the new armoured trucks arrive, Webster said.

"I would hope that we have this truck [the BearCat] and never, ever had to use it," Webster said. "I don't foresee that." Webster said once the Vancouver police have one BearCat, they will start raising funds for a second.

"One is good," he said, but added that most police departments use these type of vehicles in tandem: "Two is much, much better."

Unlike military armored vehicles, the BearCat is built on a commercial truck chassis and is readily serviceable at local Ford dealers. It is equipped with a 350 HP turbo-charged diesel engine, automatic transmission, 4-wheel drive, power steering, power anti-lock brakes (ABS), air conditioning, and even has cup holders and an AM-FM Stereo CD player.

The vehicle is equipped with (6) run-flat tires, armored fuel tank, radiator and engine compartment. It has running boards on the sides for officers to ride on and deploy from.

Mil-Spec steel armor plate -- readily defeats armour piercing ammunitions, and is resistant to grenade and mine blast and IED (improvised explosive device) attacks.

There are gunports large enough to fit 'less-lethal' gas canisters; a rotating hatch that can be used for escape/rescue or as ballistic shielding.

THE LENCO BEARCAT

Top speed: 85 m.p.h.

Engine: 6.4-litre diesel / 355 horsepower

Features: 4-wheel drive

Width: 93 inches

Length: 20 feet

Height: 90 inches

Rotating roof hatch on Law Enforcement model can be used as an escape or rescue hatch, as well as the hatch door for use as an armored shield for protection against gunfire.

Some popular optional equipment includes:

Thermal image camera (for night vision); radiation detection package (detects dirty bombs); explosive gas detection system (can sense explosive gas, such as methane or propane and warns of imminent danger.)

The BearCat has seating for (10) officers, and can accommodate additional personnel on the sides, as well as additional evacuees who might simply need to 'pile-in'.

