



Staff photos by SHANNON O'BRIEN

Sheriff Ed Bieluch unveils the 14-ton 'Hulk' at the Cross County shopping plaza at the corner of Okeechobee Boulevard and Military Trail Monday.

Felix Bueno, 20 months, apparently finds the Hulk action figure on the dashboard area of the sheriff's office's latest addition more appealing than the vehicle that is referred to as The B.E.A.R. — Ballistic Engineered Armored Response and Rescue Vehicle.



Showing off armored vehicle

BIG AND GREEN: Sheriff Ed Bieluch shows off the office's latest addition during the national Night Out Against Crime Monday. The bulletproof vehicle, called 'The Hulk' because of its size and color, can comfortably fit 18 members of the Emergency Response Team.



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'Hulk' to the rescue

By Bill Douthat, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer
Saturday, August 2, 2003

Palm Beach County commissioners who question Sheriff Ed Bieluch's big-ticket purchases of helicopters, specialty vehicles and a boat can now add "The Hulk" to the mix.

Bieluch flew to Massachusetts Friday to take delivery of a 14-ton armored vehicle that carries a \$199,095 sticker price. Because the heavyweight truck is colored green, as ordered by the sheriff, it has earned the "Hulk" nickname after the comic book and film superhero.

The new vehicle carries 12 SWAT deputies and can safely load hostages amid a hail of gunfire, said sheriff's Capt. Bill Testa, who commands the sheriff's Emergency Response Team.

"There is a need to be able to rescue people in a bulletproof environment," Testa said.

Sheriff's officials said no taxes were used to buy the vehicle, which was paid for with federal Law Enforcement Trust Funds obtained through drug arrest forfeitures. That money cannot be spent on routine expenses, such as salaries for deputies.

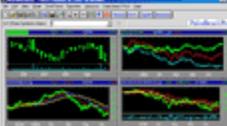
The county commission has been urging the sheriff to use his budget surplus to increase his road patrol force. The sheriff's own figures show he has fewer deputies assigned to road patrol -- 343 vs. 295 -- than when he took office 2 1/2 years ago.

Even though the armored vehicle was paid for by drug arrest forfeitures, at least one county commissioner was upset that Bieluch didn't consult with them before deciding to buy the vehicle.

"It's like all his purchases; there should have been more discussion with the commission," Commissioner Warren Newell said Friday. "Especially with these large purchases, we'd like to understand what he wants to accomplish."

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County commissioners suggested during a budget meeting this month that Bieluch should consult with them on major purchases and long-range goals.

The sheriff's department said it needed the new vehicle because the department's current one -- a 30-year-old military surplus model -- carries only four people and has broken down in four of its last six call-outs, Testa said.

36 vehicles sold since 1997

The vehicle's manufacturer, Lenco Industries, has sold about 36 of the armored vehicles since the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 and the North Hollywood bank shootout in 1997. At Columbine, 12 students and a teacher were killed before the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed themselves. During the bank robbery, bandits carrying AK-47 assault rifles engaged police in a 20-minute standoff. Two robbers ended up dead along with three bystanders. Six police officers were wounded.

These incidents showed the vulnerability of police and victims, said Len Light, president of Lenco.

"At Columbine, why didn't they have an armored vehicle so they could load up 35 kids at a time and drive them away?"

Light said rounds from AK-47 and M-16 rifles bounce off the vehicle's armor, yet the rescue-truck styling and non-military appearance make it more "acceptable" to local communities.

The company calls the model a BEAR, for Ballistic Engineered Armored Response and Rescue vehicle. Sheriff's Maj. Dan Smith said the Emergency Response Team, made up of 22 full-time members, can use the vehicle to respond to natural disasters, serve arrest warrants to dangerous felons, or rescue people trapped by gunfire.

"We can back right up to the building, and have the ability to bring people in or take people out," Smith said. "We need more capacity to rescue."

With the SWAT team seats in an upright position, the BEAR can fit 30 civilians inside, Lenco Industries says.

Light said the more than 1,000 surplus military vehicles given away to police departments around the country are wearing out with no spare parts available.

"In an emergency, you want police to show up, not call back and say 'Oh, gee, the water pump broke,'" Light said.

Blasted for big-ticket items

Bieluch, who seldom consults with anyone outside his agency when

making major purchases, told a *Palm Beach Post* reporter Thursday that he was thinking about acquiring an armored vehicle but would not confirm the purchase.

The vehicle is expected to arrive at the sheriff's office on Monday, sheriff's officials said.

Since taking office in 2001, Bieluch has been criticized for buying expensive items such as Chrysler PT Cruisers for driver education classes, helicopters, a high-speed boat, a communications and surveillance bus, a robot used for crime-prevention programs and his own assigned vehicle, a roomy Ford Expedition, which was originally to be used by the bomb squad.

While some of those items were paid for through drug forfeiture money, Bieluch has had an ongoing battle with the county commission over how he spends his budget surplus.

Last week he used some of his surplus to buy a \$2.2 million helicopter he said was needed to fight crime.

Though the armored vehicle wasn't paid for through the budget surplus, it still rankled Newell, who said the sheriff must be leafing through an equipment catalog to plan his spending.

"We need a copy of that catalog to help us with our future budgets," Newell said.

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