

Police enlist 8-ton ally to deal with dangerous suspects

COLTON: Police Chief says the bullet resistant truck will be used when gunfire is exchanged



Greg Vojtko / The Press-Enterprise

Colton police added an 8-ton member to its force this month -- a diesel-powered, bullet-resistant vehicle equipped with gun ports. The Ford F-550 frame truck will be deployed if officers exchange gunfire with suspects, rescue anyone injured during a gun battle or serve high-risk search warrants, Police Chief Ken Rulon said.

Although there haven't been any full-out gun battles in recent years, officers have had to arrest suspects in places that could be threatening, Lt. Mark Owens said.

"The most recent incident we had was when there was a suspect that we needed to arrest who we believed could be armed and dangerous," Owens said of a warrant served last fall. "There was only one way into the home where the suspect was and one way out, and that could have put officers in a compromising situation."

The \$200,000 vehicle was purchased with money collected when criminals' assets are seized. It has a 40-year life span, Rulon said. Other Inland police agencies also have bullet-resistant vehicles or depend on the one owned by the Sheriff's Department.

To make sure everyone is safe during any event, other police agencies may borrow Colton's vehicle during an emergency or to serve warrants, Rulon said. "It's a tool and we should let others have access to it to make their job safer and to protect the public," he said.

The vehicle is under the SWAT team's command and has been used three times since it was delivered earlier this month, Rulon said. The truck was used to serve three separate search warrants and is displayed during city events, such as Unity Day, he said.

Councilman Richard DeLaRosa said he is glad the department was able to purchase the vehicle without any cost to residents. "With all the gang wars going on in San Bernardino and surrounding cities, you see crime is only getting worse as far as I'm concerned, so it's a benefit to have something like this in Colton," DeLaRosa said.

Because the Colton Police Department has SWAT and gang-suppression teams, it is important that officers have the right kind of equipment, he said.

In June 2004, a 20-year-old Fontana man was fatally shot in Colton after hijacking a car with two women in it and ramming a police vehicle during a pursuit. Rulon said he doesn't know if the department would have had time to mobilize the bullet-resistant vehicle in that situation because the "suspect was very mobile." "It would be more for rescuing citizens and officers where there is gunfire or high risk or during riot situations," he said.

Palm Springs police purchased a **Lenco BearCat** armored vehicle for a little over \$200,000 last month.

Sgt. Mitch Spike, a department spokesman, said officers recognized the need for an armored vehicle in 1997 when they responded to a shooting near the outskirts of town that killed two Riverside County sheriff's deputies. "They were shot and bleeding and we couldn't go in and get them because shots were still being fired," Spike said.

The Corona Police Department uses an armored car for high-risk scenarios but has no plans for new additions to its fleet, Sgt. Neil Reynolds said. Temecula, Lake Elsinore and Moreno Valley do not have armored vehicles.

Lt. Joe Cleary, a Moreno Valley patrol supervisor, said his officers would welcome the addition of that type of vehicle, although it could be impractical. "There isn't a hard and fast answer to it," Cleary said. "Yes, it would be nice to have, but, in terms of regular duties, it (could) be sitting around in the parking lot."

Police in the Pass also see the need for an armored vehicle because a booming population will probably lead to an increase in crime, said Lt. Mike Mass of the California Highway Patrol. The Interstate 10 corridor between Cabazon and Calimesa is as ripe for gun battles as any other Inland freeway, Mass said.

In Cabazon last June, I-10 was closed when police and a Coachella Valley homicide suspect exchanged at least 90 rounds. No one was injured, but investigators worked for 12 hours processing two crime scenes straddling the Fields Road offramp. Traffic was stacked up for more than 10 miles. "Something like that could easily happen out here," Mass said by phone from the CHP substation in Beaumont.

However, Lt. John Acosta said he could not recall a single gun battle in Beaumont during his 24 years with the city's Police Department. "I don't think we're there yet," Acosta said Tuesday.

Staff writers Imran Vittachi, David Herman, Patrick O'Neil, Paul DeCarlo and John Asbury contributed to this report.

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Survey

Is it a good idea for a police department to spend \$200,000 on a bullet resistant police car? Are there other public safety issues that could be fixed with this money? Comment

-- Yes this is a great idea. It provides for greater officer safety while serving high risk warrants or while coming to the aid of an injured person during a fire. Sure they could use this money for more police officers, but if the police department does not have officer safety tools such as this one, officers will pay the price. And to all of you who are against the police, one day this vehicle could be used to save you.

-- I think it's a great idea. How much salary does one officer make in a year? These guys need as much protection as possible and I think every dept. should have one. Finally, money well spent.

-- It's money well spent in my opinion. Need to protect our police as much as possible when they are out there putting their life in danger trying to do their job to protect the public.

-- I think they are doing the right thing. If we had an incident that required an armored vehicle and did not have one, we would probably say, "Don't the Police prepare for these high risk incidents?"

-- This chief spends money like crazy \$10,000 dollars on plasma screens for the police gym. Almost one million on weights. All tax payers money no matter how you look at it.

-- Absolutely! The time you need one isn't the time to start thinking about buying one. The North Hollywood shootout is a prime example. The City of LA refused to find the money to buy one which could have been a clear asset to the community at that time. Now, they have several to serve the community in a crisis because they have seen the ten fold return in public safety. The Norco bank shootout is another example. Not to mention these crazy shootouts we see on the news from time to time. The City of Riverside doesn't have any kind of bullet proof vehicle to help citizens or officers that are shot. That's right, "DOES NOT!" The likelihood of something happening is becoming greater and greater as time passes and Riverside officers may be put in the position where they can't immediately help someone without one. Given the relatively low one time expense compared to other things the City of Riverside buys (i.e. Trash truck) I don't see the logic. Unless they are just gambling that nothing will happen here? I guess "ignorance is bliss". As a citizen, I want to know the Police are coming to help me or my family in these situations not staying away and watching. Don't you? I hope nobody has to find out the hard way.