

Rigged and Ready

By John Sena
The New Mexican

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John Schaerfl of the Santa Fe Police Department's Special Weapons and Tactics team peers from the hatch of the team's new \$250,000 armored vehicle Wednesday at City Hall.

Santa Fe police presented their newest tool in crime fighting, the \$250,000 Bearcat armored tactical vehicle, to the City Council on Wednesday. With its black paint job and big, knobby tires, it looks a little like a not-so-aerodynamic Batmobile.

"The primary function is officer safety," said Officer John Schaerfl, the department's Special Weapons and Tactics team leader. Schaerfl said the Bearcat is perfect for situations where officers might face armed suspects, such as hostage or barricade situations.

The vehicle is a converted Ford F-550 truck made by Lenco Armored Vehicles in Pittsfield, Mass. It seats up to 13 officers on two seats and two rear benches and is equipped with an intercom system that will allow officers to negotiate with an armed suspect.

The Bearcat's steel shell is rated to protect officers against any ammunition that is "commercially available" to the public, Schaerfl said, though he pointed out a similar vehicle in

another state had survived an encounter with a fully automatic AK-47 with only scratches.

The vehicle also has a radiation-detection system and the ability to detect a potentially explosive atmosphere, Schaerfl said. There are also 11 ports from which officers could point their guns.

The Bearcat will become the primary vehicle for any SWAT call, replacing a vehicle that officers said they received in the early 1990s. "Our other one was really on its last legs," Schaerfl said.

The vehicle is the product of an effort by Gov. Bill Richardson and state Homeland Security Director Tim Manning to outfit the state's SWAT teams with the tools they might need in case of a terrorist attack, Schaerfl said. He said five such vehicles are currently operating in the state.

Santa Fe's SWAT team responds to cases involving hostages, barricaded suspects, high-risk warrant arrests, public protests and as support for dignitary protection.