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Henry County police to buy armored vehicle after deadly shooting

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May 9, 2019

The Henry County Police Department is getting an armored vehicle and the ability to see in the dark as a result of last month's deadly shooting of a pregnant mother and her son in the Eagle Ridge subdivision.

The county commission on Tuesday unanimously approved \$383,000 to pay for a BearCat armored vehicle, 10 night vision goggles and 30 protective helmets to use in future emergencies.

Police said having the equipment could have been helpful in the more than 16-hour April 4 standoff with Anthony Bailey, who is accused of shooting and killing his pregnant girlfriend, Sandra Renee White, and her son, Arkeyvion, before turning the gun on himself.

Bailey also is accused of shooting two Henry County officers — Taylor Webb and Keegan Merritt — both of whom were treated and released from hospitals.

Webb was shot in the chest and hip while Merritt was shot in the hand.

“It’s sad that we actually have to have an armored vehicle, but as the world changes we need to be prepared to mitigate instances and save lives,” Assistant County Manager Brad Johnson told commissioners. Johnson said the vehicles kept the police safe after Bailey allegedly shot at them.

Military-grade equipment purchases by law enforcement is growing around the country and many metro Atlanta police departments and sheriff’s offices are already in possession of armored vehicles.

But some worry law enforcement could be tempted to deploy the tools in everyday policing situations instead of the more extreme circumstances for which they are intended. If that happens, the public would feel more like their communities are being occupied rather than protected.

“When police departments get equipment, they feel inclined to use it,” said Dean Dabney, chairman of Georgia State University’s Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology. “The kind of mission creep of militarization is the idea that we’re using it more and more because we can, not because we need to.”

It also doesn’t always pay off as an investment, said Jonathan Blanks, a research associate in the Cato Institute’s Project on Criminal Justice. Often it is just as easy to borrow such equipment from a pool than to own when there are not enough emergencies to warrant such costly expenditures.

“It’s a longer term investment, which includes maintenance and training,” he said. “But the benefit is marginal at best if you have access to the equipment already.”

Police from several public safety departments around the south metro area helped Henry officers in the standoff, which began around 9 a.m. and ended about 3 a.m. the next day. Law enforcement from Clayton and Butts counties, both of which have armored vehicles, were on the scene, as well as police from the city of Jonesboro and Henry County Sheriff’s Office.

“Clayton County’s BearCat got shot somewhere between six and eight times,” Henry Police Chief Mark Amerman told the commission. “We used Butts County’s armored vehicle to transport people and equipment so it wouldn’t be in the kill zone.”

It’s unfortunate we had to wait for this kind of incident to happen, but the county is in desperate need of having an armored vehicle for the safety of its officers, its SWAT team and the citizens of Henry County,” Amerman said.

In addition to adding the armored vehicle and goggles, the police are getting new tear gas launchers and medical kits that will come out of the department’s budget, Amerman said.

Henry Commission Chairwoman June Wood said she was happy to see the police department’s effort to improve its response and sent her condolences to the family of the victims.

“Let’s continue to think forward as our community continues to grow,” she said. “I’m glad to see this.”