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SMPD says armored vehicle an 'expectation'

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With the Santa Maria Police Department expecting receipt of a \$229,000 Lenco BearCat G2 in March, leaders say the armored truck is a “defensive tool” that will protect officers, rather than a step toward militarization.

“It’s just a way to protect officers and citizens,” Cmdr. Phil Hansen said.

Law enforcement use of armored vehicles has been part of a broader conversation on police militarization since August, when the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, set off demonstrations, looting and a high-profile police response.

The Santa Maria Police Council, a nonprofit organization that supports the department, received an \$135,000 grant from a private foundation that wished to remain anonymous in October. The grant was specifically earmarked for the BearCat, said Etta Waterfield, Police Council executive director and Santa Maria City Councilwoman.

The Santa Barbara Police Department in 2010 bought a Lenco Bearcat similar to the vehicle the Santa Maria Police Department has ordered.

The remainder of the cost is being covered by Measure U funds that the City Council unanimously authorized for the purchase in November. Police Chief Ralph Martin told the council that the funds were left over from \$254,000 that was allocated to purchase cars for five new sergeant positions.

Hansen said that the vehicle, with armor rated to withstand .50-caliber rounds, could be used to provide a “rally point” for officers or to bring hostage negotiators forward. He said that possession of an armored vehicle is an expectation of police departments today.

The Santa Barbara Police Department has a BearCat, while the Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Department has a Lenco Bear, a larger model. Hansen said the BearCat, built on a Ford F-550 light truck chassis, is more maneuverable than the Bear and does not require a special license to drive.

Different opinion

Trevor Burrus, a research fellow with the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies, thinks citizens should be concerned about their police departments obtaining such vehicles, however.

“What we have seen is that the gear itself — for whatever reasons, logistically or even psychologically — has changed how police behave,” he said.

Burrus added that when police departments obtain armored vehicles, they find reasons to use them, and not just in the active shooter or hostage situations envisioned by Hansen.

“We have an unbelievable amount of SWAT raids in this country while the violent crime rate has been cut in half,” Burrus said.

Hansen denied that the BearCat is a sign of police militarization and denounced comparisons between such armored vehicles and tanks, or the military’s mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles, or MRAPs.

Police departments across the country have received MRAPs through the Department of Defense's 1033 surplus program. However, the BearCat, Hansen said, is built specifically for domestic law enforcement use.

Hansen said that tactics, not equipment, are what matters in how law enforcement agencies interact with the public.

Former Santa Maria City Councilman Mike Cordero, a retired Santa Maria police lieutenant, agreed.

“Do we expose the officers and get two or three more people shot?” he asked rhetorically about an active shooter situation.

Not Ferguson

Cordero said he does not believe the department would use armored vehicles in the same manner police in Ferguson did while responding to the demonstrations there.

“You would not see that kind of a situation (in Santa Maria),” he said, praising Martin’s leadership of the department.

Santa Maria resident Roy Allen, who is concerned about the vehicle, acknowledged that he didn’t notice an overbearing or intimidating police presence at last year’s protests against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility that is being built on West Century Street.

Equipment reduction

After Martin took over the department in August 2012 following the resignation of then-Chief Danny Macagni, he instituted numerous changes, one of which was disposing of some equipment that the department had acquired through a military surplus program.

Cordero said that Macagni had used the program to more or less collect military equipment.

“He used his position to play in a place he normally wouldn’t have been able to,” Cordero said.

Hansen said that the department went from nine Humvees down to two after Martin took over, although Cordero said the department had many more through the years.

Santa Barbara Police Chief Cam Sanchez speaks in 2010 about the Lenco Bearcat the department had just purchased and in high-risk scenarios. The vehicle weighs 18,000 pounds and was valued at just over \$240,000.

None of the Humvees were armored, Hansen said, making them similar to their civilian counterpart, the AM General Hummer that was produced from 1992 to 2006.

Still in the department’s inventory is an Air Force surplus Peacekeeper armored truck that Cordero believes was acquired from the Fresno Police Department. Hansen said that the department is still using it to serve warrants pending the arrival of the BearCat.

Cordero said the department also had a half-track armored personnel carrier at one point.

The department also got rid of a Barrett .50-caliber sniper rifle that was purchased by the Police Council.

Hansen said the decision to transfer the rifle to the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department was his call.

“Quite frankly, I didn’t feel we had a need for it,” he said.

Cordero also said that the rifle was of no practical use to the department.

“It’s a military weapon,” he said.

Audit suggestion

Getting rid of military equipment acquired from the Department of Defense and by other means was one of 57 recommendations made by an independent audit of the Police Department, commissioned by the City Council in February 2012.

The audit, by the Los Angeles-based Office of Independent Review, a citizen oversight group, was ordered following several fatal officer-involved shootings.

“The department went through substantial trials,” said Hansen, a former colleague of Martin’s with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department who was brought in by the chief to help reorganize the department.

“Prior to the appointment of the current chief, SMPD spent significant hours accumulating military surplus equipment,” according to the report, which called the practice “at best an unnecessary distraction.”

The audit noted that after assuming command of the department, Martin had ordered an inventory of the equipment.

Cato Institute's Burrus said that if police departments must have armored vehicles, then city councils should exercise greater oversight of their use and demand to know how many times they are used and for what purpose.

Santa Barbara Police Department spokesman Sgt. Riley Harwood said that the department deploys its BearCat about four times per year.

"Ideally, these things should gather rust," Burrus said.