

EDITORIAL: We can't afford take-home cars

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In May 2008, as gas was approaching \$4 a gallon and the county was preparing its budget for the next fiscal year, the issue of employees using work vehicles to commute to and from work came into the spotlight.

Fast-forward three years and the topic has again been thrust to the forefront as, once more, the county works on its upcoming budget and gas is knocking on the door of \$4 per gallon. To make matters worse, the economy has been far more sluggish in the years leading up to this year's budgeting process than it was in 2008.

This year, the Cecil County Sheriff's Office is trying to draft its budget amid a drop in state aid of almost three-quarters of a million dollars. The cuts affect the Community Adult Rehabilitation Center program, which allows some non-violent offenders to work outside the jail

Cecil County Sheriff Barry Janney and Director of Community Corrections Jeffery Clewer met with county commissioners last week, followed by a second meeting between Clewer and Budget Manager Craig Whiteford.

They were trying to address the \$714,000 gap in the corrections program budget, with Janney and corrections staff saying any additional cuts beyond the \$394,000 in proposed reductions will necessitate the elimination of positions.

The commissioners countered by saying there was no unallocated \$700,000 to take the place of the state aid.

That's when commissioners suggested, among other cost-cutting measures, doing away with deputies' take-home vehicles.

Janney quickly tried to dissuade them of that idea, saying cruisers parked in neighborhoods help control crime and that he is "totally opposed" to eliminating that program.

The sheriff also touted the cars' crime deterring qualities three years ago.

"It's visibility or \$4 a gallon," Janney said at the time. "But if their presence will prevent a crime or if they can get to a call quicker, it's worth it."

In 2007, Mark Messner, then the secretary of Cecil County Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 2, responded to a letter to the editor in the Whig critical of the take-home policy. He said officers' tours of duty start when they get in their patrol car, and with vehicles at home, they are ready to respond even on their way to and from work.

"If you consider the down time an officer on duty would require to return a vehicle to the police station so another can get into it and return to the rural patrol areas of the county, this would greatly increase the opportunity for crimes to occur against the citizens we are sworn to protect," Messner wrote.

Deputies are not the only public employees with take-home vehicles.

In 2008, the county government had 14 take-home vehicles. At the time, county Budget Manager Craig Whiteford said, "If it got really bad, the county may eliminate usage of those take-home vehicles."

Since then, the county has cut most of its take-home privileges. Whiteford said Monday that fewer than five remain - all for employees who are on call.

Cecil County Public Schools have three take-home vehicles, emergency utility vans that maintenance workers use to respond to, for example, HVAC emergencies.

The sheriff's office has an active fleet of 76 vehicles, down from 78 in May 2008. Whiteford said cruisers must serve at least 100,000 miles (which takes three to four years) before they're replaced. A replacement cruiser - which can have costly communications gear from its predecessor installed - outfitted with safety equipment costs about \$30,500.

Whiteford said the sheriff's office and county are working to try to reduce costs on several fronts, including financing new cruisers as opposed to buying them outright and replacing the Ford Crown Victorias (which are soon to be discontinued) with the more fuel-efficient Chevy Impalas.

The work to reduce expenses is admirable, and a good start. And while we appreciate the arguments for take-home cruisers, we also think the time has come to amend that policy.

Making ends meet has become increasingly difficult. A take-home cruiser is more than just a perk. We believe Janney's assertion that a parked cruiser will make a burglar, drug dealer, etc. think twice and probably move on.

But at what cost? Do we keep take-home cruisers and leave vacant deputy positions unfilled or, worse yet, lay off deputies? That doesn't make sense.

When the choice is off-duty car use or fewer officers on the streets, the answer is clear - keep the cops, ditch the cars.