

COLUMN: Take-home patrol cars a cheap way to add neighborhood police presence

Posted: Wednesday, May 11, 2011 12:00 am

In advocating the elimination of take-home vehicles from Cecil County deputies, the Cecil Whig acknowledges its advantages in crime prevention, but appears to disregard them as trivial by asking the rhetorical question: At what cost? The public would no doubt see the immediate effects of such a short-sighted proposal, but not in ways they would have expected or wanted.

It is a fact, backed by countless national studies, that police agencies with take-home vehicles get more out of them in the long run than agencies that do not. The vehicles are better taken care of, suffer less wear and tear, are cleaned and detailed at the deputy's expense, and are always in operational condition to serve the public.

By contrast, agencies without take-home vehicles likely have a third of their fleet out of service and those that are in operation are used 24 hours a day every day by numerous officers and are most likely dirty, run-down, with body damage, high mileage, and are substandard at best.

This greatly increases maintenance and replacement costs which would be minimized by a take-home vehicle policy.

Cecil County's take-home vehicles are extremely important in the retention of experienced deputies. Like the oft greeting we get at the convenience store of "You guys are under-paid!" our salaries are not competitive with surrounding agencies and we're getting further behind each year that the county does not fund our pay-scale steps.

Not once has FOP publicly complained because, as taxpayers ourselves, we understand the economic times and are trying to do our part in shared sacrifice. Having a take-home vehicle has helped to mitigate this loss. More than one young deputy has told me that the deciding factor between them taking a job at a higher paying agency and making their home here was being assigned a take-home vehicle. They have made life-altering decisions to serve Cecil County and the county's commitment to them should be honored.

More importantly, especially to taxpayers, is the high return in public safety this program yields. The sheriff was absolutely correct in his statement that take-home vehicles are invaluable tools in increased police presence and criminal suppression. Allow me to take this a step further. Deputies choosing to operate their patrol vehicles off-duty, trade off their private citizen status by the requirement to arm themselves for immediate response to emergencies.

Off-duty deputies' quick response to in-progress crimes resulting in criminal apprehensions (often before an on-duty officer can get there) or backing up other officers already involved in tense

situations occurs numerous times in any given year. Two years ago an off-duty deputy interrupted an attempted murder in Warwick. An irate man had run over another man two times with his car and was working on a third when the deputy interceded and held him at gunpoint until he could be arrested by on-duty deputies who were still 15 minutes away.

More recently, in January, an on-duty deputy was in a vehicle pursuit with a suspect, well known to federal, state and local law enforcement, who had rammed his patrol vehicle several times. An off-duty deputy in the area had just left his home for the gym and joined the pursuit, which ultimately ended in the suspect being shot after he leveled a loaded gun at their heads. While police are trained to take care of themselves, one can't help but wonder what tragedy may have occurred had the off-duty deputy not been there. Perhaps the Whig would have had a different and more somber subject matter to editorialize.

The Whig is right on this point: take-home vehicles are more than just a perk. With government's first priority being the protection of its citizens, they are a relatively low cost way of providing additional police presence in our communities with armed deputies ready to respond to emergencies when every second counts.

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