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Supervisors irked over vehicle issue

By Chris Daley | Democrat staff writer | March 19, 2009 12:21

Much like a graduate school seminar, El Dorado County's Board of Supervisors on Tuesday wrestled with relatively small issues that often mask much larger concepts. "What constitutes an emergency" and if there were an emergency, what is an acceptable length of time for first responders to respond

At the center of the discussion was the matter of when and why does a county employee take a county vehicle home. Department of Transportation Interim Director Jim Ware told the board that 13 specialized vehicles are needed around the clock, particularly during winter months to deal with "emergencies" that might arise after normal work hours.

Chief Administrative Officer Gayle Erbe-Hamlin recommended that the board "approve an initial permanent assignment and overnight retention of county owned vehicles." That is, county supervisors rather than department heads or program managers should establish the number of county vehicles being retained on 24-hour service at any given time. Her recommendation cited the necessity for 67 vehicles in that category, 59 of which are currently assigned to the Sheriff's Department. Transportation got a recommendation for only three vehicles.

Principal Administrative Analyst Laura Schwartz told the Mountain Democrat Wednesday that the overall cost of those vehicles would be about \$50,000 annually.

Transportation's Ware justified his request to the board, saying, "We need the management flexibility to deal with an emergency. The number is 13, and that's the program we've been running for a long time."

Employees who live in widely spread out areas of the county take vehicles home in order to be able to respond to an emergency in their neighborhoods rather than having to drive in to the department's headquarters on Headington Road off Missouri Flat Road in Placerville.

The questions of what is an emergency and how long should response time be were catalysts for much of the discussion. Ware explained that his staff operates on a target of 20 to 30 minutes to respond to an emergency, which could be anything from flooding to avalanche to trees falling down on roads. Department vehicles are all specially equipped to deal with a wide range of emergencies, he said. Chain saws, caution signs, heavier equipment to clear roads are generally part of the department's fleet, he added.

If staff had to drive in to a central location to pick up the specialty vehicle before responding to an emergency, the 20 to 30 minutes could easily turn into an hour or more, Ware said. He added that if the board directed, his department "might change to an hour instead, and I'd be happy to respond and participate in a cost analysis" of the issue, he said.

Public perception that county employees regard the vehicles as a benefit or "perk" are much in error, Ware noted further. "We appreciate the appearance of impropriety, but my staff can't stop for a

gallon of milk or to pick up the girls from soccer practice,” he said. The vehicles are strictly limited to responding to the needs of the public.

District 1 Supervisor John Knight wondered, “Where truly is the need” while Ray Nutting, District 2, weighed in and noted that response time is a policy issue. “Is an hour acceptable” he asked and later noted that a 24-hour on-call employee is not needed to deal with a “200-year earthquake.”

Supervisor Jack Sweeney, District 3, was most vocal in questioning the overall need for so many vehicles on overnight status, and also he expressed great concern that county employees who live outside the county invite criticism for driving the county vehicle so far away from its duty area. Calling that the “first sin,” Sweeney said “standby vehicles need to be in the county” and added, “I’m not going to manage it, but I would like to see some other numbers.”

He particularly noted that the need for 59 Sheriff’s Department vehicles represented an “outrageous” number.

Tom Celio, deputy transportation director, reiterated that “It’s not a perk for a highway maintenance worker to have a highway maintenance vehicle at his home. It’s about emergency response, disasters, toxic spills, floods,” and those require an assessment and determination on the spot of what makes it an emergency, he said.

Both transportation and sheriff’s staff explained that the take-home system was not necessarily more expensive than one in which on-call employees are paid overtime for their after-hours duties but would have to pick up a vehicle at a central location instead of having it at their home.

Sheriff Jeff Neves opened his remarks noting that he “agrees with most of the board’s concerns, but not all. Like you, I’m an elected official, and no one gets a perk car,” he said.

He explained that his department maintains 10 cars per shift for patrol services. “The others are invisible but needed for emergencies. We need a minimum of five deputies for most situations” to deal with separate aspects of investigations, evidence and the like, he said.

Sweeney said he acknowledged the sheriff’s explanation as well as that of transportation staff but requested that the CAO and department heads re-examine their figures.

Supervisor Knight echoed Sweeney saying, “I don’t like these numbers either, and I’d like to be shown the true emergency need. We want department heads to work with the CAO,” to reduce the allocations.

Chairman Ron Briggs, District 4, followed up advising, “If they won’t work with the CAO, then we’ll set the number,” to which Knight quipped, “And they may not like it.”

The board eventually directed Erbe-Hamlin and department heads to go back to their respective drawing boards and make additional efforts to reduce the number of standby vehicles for each department.

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