

Safer police cars

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Rockland's police union today will receive a \$30,000 state grant to help pay for safety upgrades on 200 police cruisers whose gas tanks could explode if struck from behind at high speed.

A plastic panel filled with a fire-retardant powder would be installed between the fuel tank and the rear axle of Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptors. In a rear-end collision, the impact would release the powder, similar to that found in a fire extinguisher, and prevent a fire and explosion.

"This goes a long way to make the cars physically safer," said Brent Newbury, president of the Rockland Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, who researched and proposed the device that will be used.

State officials said yesterday that this was the first time the equipment would be used by police departments on the East Coast.

The total cost of the equipment, which has been used on military aircraft and race cars for years — is \$65,000. The 11 towns and villages with their own police departments would be responsible for the balance.

There is no timetable concerning when the work would be completed because each municipality or police department would have to order the equipment separately.

Fourteen police officers across the country have died since the early 1990s after being trapped in the Interceptors, and nine have been seriously injured.

The vehicle's safety was called into question again last month after state Trooper Robert W. Ambrose, a Pearl River resident, was killed. His Interceptor exploded after it was hit from behind by a sport utility vehicle while he was responding to a minor car accident on the New York State Thruway in Yonkers.

Rockland's 11 police departments immediately pulled their cruisers off the road and began retrofitting fuel tanks with plastic shields. Several have completed the task, while others are still working on it.

The fire retardant device, known as FIRE Panel, would provide an additional level of safety for officers using the Crown Victoria cruisers, Newbury said.

"We're pretty much married to these things so we might as well make them safer," he said.

Newbury said he knew of five police departments nationwide, including those in Arizona and Honolulu, using the device.

He learned of the devices, which cost \$321 each, last month and recently contacted three of Rockland's state lawmakers — Sen. Thomas Morahan, R-New City, Assemblyman Alexander Gromack, D-Congers, and Assemblyman Ryan Karben, D-New Hempstead — seeking assistance to pay for the safety equipment.

"Police work is dangerous enough without all of our officers being forced to drive unsafe vehicles," Karben said in a statement. "Those whose job it is to protect us must be protected themselves."

Gromack said each elected official pledged to use \$10,000 from their member items in the yet-to-be-approved state

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budget. They will make a ceremonial check presentation to the PBA at 1 p.m. today at Clarkstown police headquarters.

Under the agreement, the PBA would receive the \$30,000 state grant and reimburse towns and villages after they purchase and install the device in police cars.

"The amount is small enough, there should be no reason they can't order the retrofitting and fix it immediately," Gromack said.

Stony Point Police Chief Daniel Ricci, who is first vice president of the Rockland Police Chiefs Association, said he had already received assurance from Town Supervisor Steven Hurley the town would pay for the new equipment for its seven patrol vehicles.

"I have to believe that every municipality is going to do it," Ricci said. "Maybe we don't have a proven track record with police vehicles, but if they're using it in the military, I'm comfortable with it."

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