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County takes step to keep police safer inside cars

BY BETH HUNDSORFER

St. Clair County has approved a measure to spend more than \$18,000 to protect deputies from burning inside their police cruisers after a rear-end collision.

A class-action lawsuit filed by Centreville alleges the Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptors used by police present a danger to officers because of the position of a rear fuel tank.

The lawsuit claims if a car collides into the back end of the cruiser, the bumper could push the fuel tank into the axle, causing the tank to puncture and allowing fuel to spill and a fire to start.

The county will equip 43 existing police cruisers and six new cars with a panel that wraps around the tank, said County Administrator Dan Maher.

If the car is struck, the panel shatters, spilling a fire suppressing powder onto the fuel, reducing the risk of fire, said Bill Eckholm, president of Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Fire Panel LLC, which produces the panels.

Fourteen officers around the country have died after collisions that resulted in fires and more than 20 were injured in crashes with fires.

"A police officer should be worried about the bad guys not about whether his office, which in his case is a Crown Victoria Police Interceptor, will catch fire if it is hit by a passing motorists," Eckholm said.

Ford Motor Co. has said the Crown Victoria is a safe car.

The panel, which costs \$ 371.25 each for a total cost of \$18,681.25, will be installed by county maintenance workers, Maher said.

"How can you afford not to do this? It's an extra measure of security for our officers who protect the county," Maher said.

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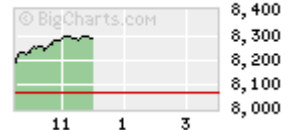
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MAY	20.45	▲ 0.55
BUD	47.38	▲ 0.41
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Updated Wednesday, Apr

St. Clair County joined the class-action suit, although no officers in the area have been injured. The suit was filed by Belleville attorney Robert Sprague.



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