



Mesquite squad cars to get blast protection

Action is in response to Dallas report; Ford defends vehicles' safety

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By **CHERIE BELL** / The Dallas Morning News

Mesquite police will spend \$250,000 on devices to prevent fuel tank explosions in Crown Victoria squad cars.

The city this week approved the expenditure, which police urged in response to a Dallas report that questioned the effectiveness of a Ford Motor Co. trunk kit designed to prevent the explosions.

"What actually prompted us to do this was Dallas' engineering report that claimed that the kit that Ford installed was not good enough, was defective," Mesquite Police Chief Gary Westphal said.

A Dallas officer was killed in October after his car was hit from behind and the fuel tank exploded.

Police organizations across the country have questioned the safety of the Ford vehicles, saying that they burst into flames when hit from behind.

Ford has defended the safety of Crown Victorias. A Ford spokeswoman said Wednesday that such accidents are rare and that the company is concerned by police departments using unproven technology.

"We certainly can understand the concerns police have in these rare but high-profile collisions," she said.

She said Ford also is testing other fire-suppression systems.

Mesquite approved the spending for fire panels, fuel safety bladders and trunk packs for all 105 police cars, including Chevrolet Camaros used primarily on the highways.

Mesquite police had studied precautions taken by the department in Phoenix.

"That's how they came up with this threefold system," said Sgt. Shannon Greenhaw, Mesquite Police Department spokeswoman.

Officer Don Williams, president of the Mesquite Police Association, praised the measures.

"For the men and women of the police association, it's a very important issue," he said. "The bad thing about those officers is they weren't being killed in those impacts; they were dying in the fire."

Chief Westphal said Mesquite's ribbon of highways was a key concern. He said the city has 20 miles of interstate roadway, 40 miles round trip, "unlike any of the other suburbs in Dallas County."

"We feel like the premier responsibility here is to protect the police officers on the streets and in their cars, on the interstates, anywhere they might be that they're susceptible to a rear-end collision," the chief said.

He commended the City Council for approving the expenditure Monday.

"That's a lot of money to spend during these economic times. However, we at the Police Department and the city and the mayor and the council feel a moral obligation to the officers to protect them, make those cars safe," he said.

The fuel safety bladder will be inside the gas tank, and the gas will be contained in the bladder if the car is hit, Chief Westphal said.

If the bladder erupts, a fire-retardant shield wrapped around the gas tank would keep the fire from spreading, he said.

The trunk pack, the only item manufactured by Ford, holds equipment in place, Chief Westphal said, "because we carry such a tremendous amount of stuff in the trunk that something in the trunk could penetrate the gas tank" if the car is hit from behind.

Council member John Monaco was pleased to support the items.

"Our Police Department here in Mesquite is being proactive and is unique in the state of Texas for ... taking action in three different ways, that is by adding three different safety measures," he said.

Mayor Mike Anderson also thanked City Manager Ted Barron and Chief Westphal "for the proactive stance in saving and protecting the lives of our public safety officers and making that a priority that this council also takes as a priority."

Staff writer Jason Trahan contributed to this report. A version of this story also appears in the Mesquite Morning News.

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