



VENTURA COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

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March 27, 1996

The Honorable Robert C. Bradley
Presiding Judge
Ventura County Superior Court
800 South Victoria Avenue
Ventura, California 93009

Honorable Judge:

The Ventura County Grand Jury "First Final Report" of February 1, 1996 contains an investigation with recommendations regarding "Sheriff Vehicle Maintenance." This letter is the statutorily required response.

The serviceability of law enforcement vehicles is of major importance to both the delivery of emergency services and to the safety of the officers delivering those services. Over the years the Sheriff's Department has worked closely with County Fleet Services in developing vehicle specifications and replacement criteria as well as procedures for service and repair.

The Sheriff's Department has two "General Orders" (policies) that have provisions applicable to the subject of this Grand Jury report, 1) "Vehicle, Use and Assignment," and 2) "Vehicles, Maintenance Of." There are also several other policies and practices in place (some written and some unwritten) that pertain to the way divisions, bureaus and/or area stations, handle vehicle matters. As an example, there is a requirement that all patrol officers turn in a daily work log that contains a section titled "Vehicle Condition" for the officer to list the results of his/her inspection of the vehicle they drove.

A "Vehicle Safety Committee" was established many years ago to deal with law enforcement vehicle issues. This committee was created to provide a proper forum for dealing with issues and problems, or perception of problems, of the type identified in the grand jury report. Additionally, as mentioned in the Grand jury report, a senior officer, Support Services Division Administrative Lieutenant (Information Services Bureau), is designated as the department wide "Vehicle Coordinator" pursuant to a provision of the general orders. This position chairs the Vehicle Safety Committee and handles/coordinates most matters between this department and both Fleet Services and County Communications. It is interesting to note that neither this lieutenant nor members of the Vehicle Safety Committee were contacted regarding the problems, or perceptions of problems, presented to the visiting Grand Jury member(s).

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Grand Jury Response

Page 2 of 4

Fleet Services has established several countywide policies and procedures that are followed by all county departments in the servicing and repairing of vehicles. It establishes the service requirements/policy (presently every 4000 miles for patrol vehicles) and the method of obtaining needed service and/or repair. It also provides the required service/repair request form, commonly known as a "kick slip." For vehicles in need of repair, an officer completes the required service request form ("kick sheet") and turns it in with the keys for designated personnel to handle the necessary interaction with Fleet Services. During normal business hours, Monday through Friday, an officer also has the option of taking a vehicle with minor problem(s) directly to the closest Fleet facility and, if possible, the repair will be made quickly while the officer waits. Some common supplies, such as light bulbs and fuses, are made available within Sheriff's Stations so that officers can themselves quickly make some minor repairs. Every time a vehicle is serviced, a mechanic also performs a multi-point safety inspection that will automatically cause additional repairs to be made on any item found defective.

The criteria for removal and/or replacement of a vehicle is established by countywide policy adopted by the Board of Supervisors acting upon input from both Fleet Services and user departments. The present criteria for replacement of a patrol vehicle is 100,000 miles, or upon a determination that the vehicle is no longer mechanically sound. Fleet Services tells us that their records indicate that with the present Ford "police package" vehicles, substantial mechanical problems are not the norm and if they do occur, it is usually between 60,000 and 80,000 miles (drivetrain still handled under warranty until 85,000 miles). Very few major problems occur between 80,000 and 100,000 miles. There is a feeling among some patrol officers that the older patrol vehicles break down a lot, however, fleet repair records do not support this perception.

The Grand Jury report seems to have focused on one patrol vehicle encountered on one occasion and uses it to make some generalized assumptions about all "older" patrol vehicles (Note: because of the 24 hour nature of law enforcement service the average patrol vehicle is replaced at 100,000 miles when it is only three years old and, thus, the term "older" patrol vehicle does not necessarily equate to "old" in terms of the actual age of the vehicle). Fleet Services service records do not support the generalized assumption made from this one vehicle. Even though "older" patrol vehicles may have some cosmetic deterioration, as a general rule they do not have problems that render them unsafe to operate. According to repair records, the door sticking problem used as an example in the grand jury report, is an uncommon condition that appears to be a one time unique problem associated with this particular vehicle. This door problem was only reported on one occasion and it was immediately repaired. This vehicle has since been replaced.

The Grand Jury Report also listed "handheld radios with dead spots" as a deficiency in older patrol vehicles. Handheld radios are not a part of a vehicle's equipment and their capabilities have nothing to do with the age or mileage of a vehicle.

Because of the mountainous terrain of this county, there are many communication weak areas and "dead spots." The patrol vehicle radios work reasonably well in most areas but do also encounter some "dead spots." The weaker handheld radios experience more difficulty in some areas, which is not associated with the condition of the handheld radio, but is instead caused by the local terrain. County Communications has been working on this situation and some improvements have been made in some areas. However, to fix all of the "dead spots," additional transmitters/receivers will have to be located on several new hilltops. Millions of dollars will be needed for property acquisition, road development, electrical service, radio equipment, and buildings. Some time ago, as an effort to help with this problem, cellular telephones were installed in patrol vehicles working the unincorporated areas.

In regard to the recommendation that the Sheriff's Department increase the patrol vehicle fleet, meetings between Fleet Services and the Sheriff's Department have produced a plan to establish a patrol vehicle "loaner" pool. This pool will provide additional patrol vehicles to temporarily replace those in for major repairs and/or extended periods of time. It will also help facilitate the immediate replacement of patrol vehicles at 100,000 miles.

It is obvious that the Grand Jury and I share the same strong opinion that unsafe patrol vehicles should never be sent into the field. I will continue to assess the situation and institute appropriate measures to ensure that officers do not drive unsafe vehicles. I thank the Grand Jury for its review of this matter and for its concern.

Sincerely,



LARRY W. CARPENTER, Sheriff