

Cost concerns ground sheriff's helicopter plan

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

Plans to launch a new aviation unit within the Oakland County Sheriff's Department are grounded until officials can determine if the cost can be justified.

"It's a very expensive proposition," said county Executive L. Brooks Patterson. His office is part of an ad hoc committee that will look at the cost of a proposal to add a helicopter to the sheriff's department.

"The cost could be as high as \$1.5 million according to under sheriff Henry Buffa, who said a helicopter would be an 'invaluable' law enforcement tool.

Buffa said the sheriff's proposal calls for an aviation unit. But the initial aircraft, he said, would be a helicopter. The proposal was approved in committee earlier this month and referred to county board of commissioners.

Before commissioners voted, however, they wanted a analysis on the cost of buying and maintaining a helicopter. They established the ad hoc committee to crunch the numbers.

"I generally support the idea of a helicopter," said commissioner Lawrence R. Pernick, D-Southfield. "But as with other proposals, we need to see the figures."

Robert J. Daddow, director of management and budget for the county, said those figures may be available as early as next month. A helicopter would not be cheap. The Michigan State Police, one of three police agencies known to have a helicopter, estimates the cost at almost \$400 per flying hour.

The state police has two helicopters and three fixed-wing aircraft in its aviation unit. Other police agencies that have helicopters are Detroit and Warren.

Earlier this year Southfield Police Chief Joseph Thomas proposed adding a helicopter to his department. But the city council declined to consider it.

"It's hard to pinpoint costs," said Lt. W. Jack Parvianon, commanding officer of state police aviation section. "The more it's used, the more useful it can be."

Buffa and other Oakland officials said a helicopter would be extremely valuable for incidents like the shoot-out at the Ford plant in Wixom and the jewelry robbery in West Bloomfield.

Sometimes local officials can

summon a helicopter, said Buffa. But for the Wixom and West Bloomfield incidents, none were available.

Martin J. Bledsoe, assistant police chief in charge of operations in Farmington Hills, said a helicopter would also be useful in high-speed chases. "Once a helicopter is involved," he said, "quad cars would not have to travel at high speeds. Our liability (for injury) would be considerably less."

Lt. Matthew Hogan, commander of the state police post in Brighton (who ran for Oakland sheriff last November), said a helicopter could be good addition.

Not necessarily for high-speed chases, he said. "They're usually over before a helicopter can be called to the scene. But helicopters are very good for searching for lost or missing children, he said.

"And they're very good for surveillance or drug interdiction," he said.

In the 1970s, Oakland had two helicopters, recalled Johannes Spreen, Democratic sheriff at the time. "They were military surplus helicopters," he said, with one used mainly for spare parts. The helicopter was extremely helpful in March 1976, when high winds and at least one tornado ravaged West Bloomfield, Spreen said. "It helped us coordinate operations and to prevent looting."

Oakland's helicopters were discontinued, Spreen said, more because of partisan bickering than financial concerns. "Commissioners wouldn't pay for things like a spotlight that made the helicopter useful in night chases."

Does Spreen think Oakland should add a helicopter? "Absolutely. They can save lives," he said. "They can be very cost effective when used in coordination with local departments."

Buffa said there would be no military surplus aircraft this time around for Oakland County. "We would seek competitive bids," he said. "And we'd be looking at a commercial aircraft."

Not only would Oakland's helicopter have a spotlight for night use, it would be equipped with a camera that projects images on the basis of body heat, said county commissioner Frank Millard, R-Clarkston. "In almost total darkness, it can detect a human being," he said.

Lobbyist turns administrator

He may no longer be lobbying for Oakland Schools, but Rick Simonson will continue to be a leader in the intermediate county school district.

Effective July 1, Simonson, one of Michigan's most effective lobbyists, will assume the position of deputy superintendent for the day-to-day operations of the Oakland Intermediate School District in Pontiac.

He was named to the position after serving nine years as assistant superintendent for legislative affairs for Oakland Schools.

Before joining the district in 1988, Simonson spent nearly 20 years as chief of staff for two state senators. A graduate and former board member of Albion College, Simonson received bachelor of arts degrees in political science and business economics.

"I started as a House page 30 years ago last January," Simonson said, adding that he was a senior at Baldwin High School in Lake County at the time.

"We worked all day and studied at night with a tutor," he said during a May interview following the announcement of his appointment.

An aggressive advocate for suburban schools, Simonson helped craft new school funding law and a new school code, earning him a top ten rating in effective advocacy in a recent poll of



Rick Simonson

Lansing insiders.

"Expertise, judgment and dedication," are his attributes, Oakland Schools Superintendent James Redmond said earlier.

"His demeanor is one of gentle professionalism. He tells the truth, not what you want to hear."

The 47-year-old will replace retiring deputy superintendent Herm Dick.

And after wading through over 100 applicants for Simonson's position, Brian Whiston, a Waterford parent and school board member has been selected to fill the legislative affairs gap left by Simonson's promotion.

Whiston, a former state senate staffer, currently handles legislative issues at the federal level for the Oakland County

Road Commission. He holds a teaching degree and has been a political consultant, playing a pivotal role in the recent election of Oakland County Prosecutor David Goyens.

Whiston decided to forego a run for State House to accept the position.

"We are pleased to announce these major changes in our ongoing effort to make Oakland Schools the best educational service agency in the country," Redmond said.

— Staff writer Tim Richard contributed to this article.

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