

Sheriff lacks support for MRAP; county supervisors to take up issue again in April

By **Anne Ternus-Bellamy** From page A1 | February 22, 2017

WOODLAND — What began as a consent calendar item on the Yolo County Board of Supervisors agenda released last week morphed into a two-hour hearing Tuesday with 26 local residents speaking out against the Sheriff's Department proposal to acquire a mine-resistant, ambush-protected military surplus vehicle.

One after another, speakers who hailed primarily from Davis urged the board to deny the sheriff's request to acquire an MRAP and to prevent further militarization of local law enforcement.

In the end, only Supervisor Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento was willing to grant Sheriff Ed Prieto's request on Tuesday.

Supervisors Don Saylor of Davis and Matt Rexroad of Woodland were opposed, while Jim Provenza of Davis and Duane Chamberlain of the rural 5th District said they would need more information before consenting to the request.

Specifically, Provenza wanted to know what the cost to the county would be to maintain the vehicle, a written protocol for when and how the vehicle would be used and justification for acquiring what would be the third MRAP in Yolo County.

Currently, both Woodland and West Sacramento have MRAPs, acquired under a federal law that allows surplus military equipment to be given to local law enforcement.

The Sheriff's Department is expected to return to the board April 25 with additional information, at which time both Provenza and Chamberlain would have to agree to the sheriff's request in order for him to move forward with the acquisition.

Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting featured an overflow crowd, with standing room only inside the chambers and additional seating set up just outside. A large turnout was expected after word began spreading late last week that the sheriff's request for an MRAP was on the agenda.

Several politically active local groups formed in the wake of President Donald Trump's election had urged members to call and email supervisors and to turn out for Tuesday's meeting.

Their concerns echoed many of those raised three years ago when the Davis Police Department acquired a similar vehicle before the City Council voted to return it, though it ended up just up the road in Woodland instead. And those fears have only been heightened in the tense political climate since Trump's inauguration.

Prieto said he knew there are concerns that the vehicle would be used to quell protests “and that’s not the purpose.” Nor, he said, would the MRAP be used to assist U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers in deporting Yolo County residents.

He noted that there have been many protests in opposition to Trump since his inauguration and added that he supports those protests if they are peaceful. But Prieto also said that acquiring an MRAP is “not a political issue”; rather, it’s one of community safety and law enforcement.

“Many of us are zeroed in on the fact that this is a military vehicle,” he said. “The important aspect to me is how the vehicle is going to be used.”

His list of reasons why the MRAP would be used, provided to the public during the meeting, included natural disaster rescues, hostage rescues, responding to active shooters and bomb threats and similar situations.

“Nowhere on that list does it indicate that we’re going to use it for crowd control or ... for any marches,” Prieto said.

The sheriff also took issue with members of the public questioning how law enforcement does its job.

“I always find it sort of interesting that there’s so many people that dictate to law enforcement how we should conduct law enforcement. I do not go to a farmer and tell him how to farm. I do not go to a contractor and tell him how to build a house,” Prieto said.

“We have a method, we have an understanding of what it takes.”

“This vehicle,” he added, serves one purpose: to protect officers. “Let’s not make a mountain out of a mole hill.”

But for the more than two dozen residents who spoke during Tuesday’s meeting, acquiring an MRAP is no mole hill.

Several noted the use of similar vehicles during protests over police shootings in Missouri and elsewhere as well as more recently their presence at protests over the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock.

“Perception is important,” said Woodland resident Cherie Goodenough. “We perceive this to be an assault vehicle.”

West Sacramento resident Norma Alcala called the MRAP “an inappropriate vehicle” at a time when there is distrust between many members of the public and law enforcement.

“You are introducing military force,” she said. “Now is not the time to be introducing this vehicle.”

Other speakers noted that crime rates have been declining for a while now and urged more focus on community policing, rather than hardening the equipment police use.

“A hardened police force acts like military,” said Davis resident Joshua Jones.

All 26 people who spoke during public comment were opposed to the Sheriff’s Department acquiring an MRAP and in Saylor they found an ally.

“There is a nationwide move to militarization of law enforcement,” Saylor said. “I want us not to escalate the arms race.

“There is no justification ... for my vote to support a third MRAP in Yolo County.”

Rexroad said simply, “I’m a firm ‘no,’ ” before adding that “it never should have been on consent. No way it should have been set up that way.”

Chamberlain, meanwhile, said he shared Provenza’s reservations about moving forward without additional information and also questioned how maintenance for a military vehicle would cost less than \$1,000 a year, as Prieto estimated.

Villegas remained the lone voice in support of the sheriff’s request.

“I don’t believe one vehicle will redefine our community’s safety,” he said.

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