

Yolo sheriff turns down free MRAP, citing 'political climate'

By Brad Branan, Sacramento Bee

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Yolo County Sheriff Ed Prieto has decided against accepting a free military vehicle, saying he doesn't want to further erode community trust during the "current national political climate and the fear of police militarization."

During a February meeting of the Board of Supervisors, community members expressed opposition to the sheriff's interest in accepting a mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle, known as an MRAP, from the FBI. In particular, residents expressed concern the Sheriff's Office would use the vehicle during protests, a claim Prieto denied.

Originally scheduled as a "consent" item for the Board of Supervisors to approve without discussion, the MRAP proposal generated more than two hours of debate that became raucous at times. Prieto opened the meeting with a lengthy defense of his proposal, even before opponents had spoken, saying he would not use the vehicle for immigration enforcement or protests.

"I do not work for ICE, I do not work for the federal government. I work for Yolo County," he said. "No one dictates what the sheriff is to do."

His comments drew jeers from audience members, some of whom were upset because the item originally had been placed on consent when previous proposals for MRAPs had been controversial in Davis and Woodland.

The Sheriff's Office became the second law-enforcement agency in Yolo County to turn down an offer of a free MRAP. The Davis Police Department returned one in 2014 after widespread community opposition. That vehicle was accepted by the Woodland Police Department.

Prieto said Monday that he believed the vehicle would have helped the office's response to certain incidents, such as a hostage situation or an active shooting at a school. But he

decided against accepting it because of the need for the community's trust.

Supervisor Don Saylor, who opposed the request in February, applauded Prieto's decision.

"I appreciate him showing the leadership in returning the MRAP," he said. "It's a pretty challenging thing to go against what you want. But in the interest of community trust, it's important to listen to the community."

Supervisors voted 4-1 in February to delay the decision until this month. Only one supervisor, Oscar Villegas of West Sacramento, indicated he would support Prieto.

Prieto acknowledged that he likely would not have received board support, but said that community opposition was his reason for pulling his request.

The proposal prompted an opposing group of residents to create a website called Protecting Yolo. One of the website's creators, Colin Walsh of Davis, said he began opposing MRAPs when law enforcement used one during an antiwar protest in Los Angeles over a decade ago. He said law enforcement agencies have used military vehicles elsewhere during protests, including demonstrations against the Dakota Access Pipeline last year.

"The sheriff said he did not plan to use it for protests. I believe him, but I also realize he won't be the sheriff forever," Walsh said.

Walsh, who said he appreciated Prieto's decision to withdraw his proposal, said the sheriff never made a convincing case for the vehicle's need. The Sheriff's Office can use the MRAPs that police in Woodland and West Sacramento have, he said.