

Few official city cars stay in town - About 2 in 3 take-home vehicles used for suburban or out-of-state commutes

By Annie Linskey, *Baltimore Sun*, June 10, 2009

Nearly two of every three city employees with a take-home vehicle leave Baltimore at night when they embark on their taxpayer-funded commute, according to an analysis requested by a city councilman searching for savings.

Most of those cars and trucks leaving the city are driven by Police Department officials who live in suburban counties and other states. In fact, more take-home police vehicles are parked in Pennsylvania overnight than in Baltimore, figures show.

"Should the city be funding personal transportation when things are really tight?" asked Councilman William H. Cole IV, who said his primary concern is the longest commutes. "When you are closing PAL centers and pools, every penny does count."

City figures show that the 247 assigned vehicles cost \$313,000 annually for fuel, plus the wear and tear on the cars and trucks.

Officials note that they've reduced the number of assigned vehicles in recent months, and Baltimore has fewer than surrounding local governments. But Howard and Anne Arundel counties, for example, prohibit such vehicles from leaving the state and rarely allow them to leave the county.

Among city departments, police have by far the most take-home cars, with 149 vehicles assigned to staff members. Of those, 107 go to staff who live in surrounding counties. Twenty-two vehicles are used by people who live out of the state. Only 18 cars stay in the city, according to the findings.

The data also show:

- One city vehicle is assigned to a police major who lives in Dover, Del. He makes the 174-mile round trip in a vehicle with an estimated fuel economy of 16 miles per gallon.
- Twenty-two police cars are assigned to employees who live in Pennsylvania, including one commander who lives in West Hempfield and commutes 166 miles each day in a vehicle that gets 15.2 mpg.
- The Police Department's top public information officer, Anthony J. Guglielmi, has a take-home car that he uses to commute from Alexandria, Va.
- The city's Fire Department has 30 take-home vehicles, with 21 assigned to people who live outside the city, including a person who commutes 154 miles to and from work. No fire vehicles go out of state.
- An employee at the Department of Public Works commutes 112.4 miles a day in a

Chevrolet Trailblazer that gets 12.6 miles to the gallon.

Khalil Zaied, head of the city's Bureau of General Services, said officials have been examining the issue "for a long time" and were "very much aware ... of the problems associated with it."

He said his department has been "asking agencies to be very, very careful" before requesting such cars.

In January, the Police Department combed through its list and made 83 officers return take-home vehicles, Guglielmi said. Fifty of the remaining cars are funded through federal grants, he said, but fuel costs are paid by the city.

All but 29 of the take-home vehicles are used by public safety departments. Civilian workers in public works, the library, recreation and parks and other departments must reimburse the city 58.5 cents per mile for commuting, which is meant to cover gasoline, maintenance and insurance.

But fire, police and sheriffs do not pay for their cars.

The report did not cover elected officials, some of whom have city cars.

Guglielmi said the police employees with take-home cars are constantly on call, and required to return to the city at a moment's notice.

"The police commissioner holds his commanders accountable; they have to respond to the needs of the communities on issues that require 24-hour response. ... If that pager goes off and there is a public safety issue, they have to be there," Guglielmi said.

About his own car, Guglielmi said that he's frequently called at odd hours to drive into Baltimore and speak on behalf of the department at the scenes of major shootings.

But Cole questioned how effective these commanders could be if they need to drive over an hour before arriving at the scene of the emergency.

"You'd be hard-pressed to convince me that the PIO [public information officer] who lives in Alexandria, Virginia, needs a police car," the councilman said. "Can't he tweet from home?"

City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake is also concerned. "The privilege of a take-home car should be an incentive for police to live in the city," said Ryan O'Doherty, her spokesman. "The tragedy is that the city is not using take-home cars as an incentive for police officers to live in the city, which makes city neighborhoods safer."

In the Fire Department, 21 of 30 employees assigned vehicles live outside the city, figures show, the second-highest number among city departments. Fire Chief James S. Clack said he began examining the issue more than a year ago, and reduced the number by 13. He said he assigned cars only to those who would likely respond to a major

emergency like the Howard Street tunnel fire or a bridge collapse.

In making assignments, Clack said, he considered how closely employees lived to the city and whether they could respond to emergencies rapidly.

He assigned smaller cars with higher gas mileage to those who live farther afield, he said, and wants all of his commanders to consider smaller cars.

The sheriff's office has the highest proportion of take-home cars that stay in the city: 31 of 39. Baltimore City Sheriff John W. Anderson did not return calls. Policies on take-home vehicles vary widely across the region.

Anne Arundel County issues marked patrol cars to 544 officers - far more than Baltimore - but those who receive them must live in the county, officials said. The marked take-home cars are considered a crime deterrent, said Fred Schram, who works in the county's central services office.

Anne Arundel government officials recently reduced the number of civilian take-home cars from 385 to 210 after a review. None of them leaves the state, and permission is needed if an employee wants a car but lives outside the county, Schram said. "We don't want these assets leaving the county if at all possible," he said.

Baltimore County government officials did not respond to calls, but county police spokesman Bill Toohey said that the 2,400-person department issues 179 take-home cars.

"They go to people who have command responsibility or 24-hour responsibilities," Toohey said. He said some of them do belong to officers who live in Pennsylvania, which borders the county to the north.

Howard County also recently reduced the number of take-home cars, after County Executive Ken Ulman noticed an employee driving home in a county car. "I thought, 'Are they leaving for the day? Are they going home?'" Ulman recalled. "I was thinking 'Who takes a car home? Who doesn't? When is the last time anyone looked at this?'"

He was alarmed by what he found: "We had people living in Pennsylvania, or across the Bay Bridge." Ulman took away 60 percent of the county civilian cars. Now, 88 civilian workers have cars, and nobody takes them out of the state.

Ulman is so pleased with the savings that he plans to review other areas, and estimates he can save \$300,000 on phone bills.

"Do [employees] really need a BlackBerry?" he asked. "Are they in the office 9-to-5? Should we just pay \$30 a month toward their cell phone? We have to be smarter about those things."