

The Charlotte Observer | Sept. 12, 2004

Wasteful or worth the price?

Local Carolinas officials spend terror funds on pickups, plasma screens

SCOTT DODD, STAFF WRITER

Here's what taxpayers are buying for the war on terror: A Ford pickup and Dodge Durango for Caswell County. An \$1,800 hand-held computer for Swain. A mobile command center for Lincoln, with a \$320,000 price tag.

Across the Carolinas, homeland security money has paid for ID card makers, Palm Pilots, plasma video screens, color printers, digital cameras, chain saws, vibrating pagers and garden hoses, an Observer investigation found.

It's all on the federal government's approved shopping list.

Congress has OK'd more than \$6 billion to help protect cities, states and communities since the 9-11 attacks three years ago. Counties in the Carolinas have received more than \$120 million of that money.

A lot has been spent on basics, such as training, emergency planning and replacing old radios.

But many communities also ordered equipment from a list of approved items they likely could never afford on their own -- and that critics say they'll probably never need to fight terrorism -- from decontamination showers to night-vision goggles to off-road fourwheelers.

About half the counties in North Carolina bought a new truck or SUV. Aiken County in South Carolina bought a \$25,000 aluminum skiff boat to patrol the Savannah River.

"Much of it is a total waste," said Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory, who thinks the states are giving too much of the federal money to smaller counties, and not enough to cities with a greater chance of being targets.

"There's no reason for a lot of these small communities to buy items that will most likely sit around and never be used."

Cherokee County in the N.C. mountains got a \$5,800 mobile weather station. It measures relative humidity, wind direction, solar radiation and leaf wetness. For more than a year, it's been sitting in the emergency management office, unused and unassembled. The official who bought it has since resigned. His replacement hasn't had time to figure out how to use it.

"I'm not sure of all of its capabilities yet," emergency management director Robin Caldwell said. "Maybe it could be used for hurricanes."

Both state and federal officials are starting to rethink the way the money is given out, to make sure it goes to communities with the most threats -- and is used on the most important needs. But critics expect little real change.

"You do this again next year, and all these counties will find another vehicle they want to buy," said Paul Light, a professor of public policy at New York University who has testified several times before Congress on homeland security issues.

"You suddenly have these very high-tech operations," Light said, "but that doesn't do anything for Charlotte or New York City or any of the other cities with real risks and threats."

State and local officials argue that small counties have risks, too, and that even if equipment is never needed for terrorism, it can still be put to good use; decontamination gear can protect people against a hazardous materials spill on the highway, as well as from chemical weapons.

"City and rural interests are very different," said Bryan Beatty, the N.C. secretary of crime control and public safety. "Everybody would like all the money to go to them, but the entire state has a need to be protected."

The Observer asked officials in both Carolinas about a month ago for records listing the equipment their counties bought with \$120 million in security grants. North Carolina provided details of what each county purchased in 2003.

The S.C. State Law Enforcement Division produced a breakdown of purchases by category in each county -- such as medical supplies or personal protective gear -- but not an item-by-item list of what each county bought.

A SLED spokeswoman said that data will take more time to compile because each purchase has to be researched individually. Friday afternoon, SLED provided detailed purchase lists for six of the state's 46 counties.

The Observer also obtained information on spending directly from several other S.C. counties, including those in the Charlotte region.

"We're getting some pretty interesting equipment we probably wouldn't have gotten otherwise," said Henry Gordon, the emergency management director for Oconee County on South Carolina's western border.

Oconee, which has a nuclear power plant and two hydroelectric dams, spent about \$35,000 on a remote-controlled underwater vehicle that can be used for drownings and boat accidents, and \$32,500 to help equip the Sheriff's Department's new helicopter.

It's used mainly for search and rescue and to fly over farm fields looking for marijuana, Gordon said, but it could also be used for homeland security needs. "It's a pretty nice little helicopter."

South Carolina's Calhoun County, south of Columbia, has 15,367 people. It bought 40 laptop computers for \$46,000, and two plasma screens and projectors for the county's emergency operations center. Cost: \$9,000.

The money and how it's divided has been controversial across the country. The 9-11 commission called the grants just another "pork barrel" for politicians to send money to their home districts. It faulted Congress and the White House for not making hard decisions about how to spend it.

"Homeland security assistance should be based strictly on an assessment of risks and vulnerabilities," the commission report said. "This issue is too important for politics as usual to prevail."

U.S. Rep. Sue Myrick, a Republican whose district includes Charlotte, voted to approve the funding but is concerned that communities are buying equipment that doesn't directly relate to terrorism. She supports legislation that would make changes in the way the money is distributed.

"Everybody feels threatened, and I understand that," Myrick said. "But we end up buying things that communities should be paying for themselves, and that's money that's not going to homeland security."

Harold Schaitberger, president of the 270,000-member International Association of Fire Fighters and a co-chair of Democratic Sen. John Kerry's presidential campaign, put it bluntly: "Too many communities are buying too many toys."

Big vs. small needs

When Congress approved billions for police and firefighters after 9-11, there was no real plan for how to spend it.

But everyone wanted it done quickly, said Beatty, North Carolina's top homeland security official, to show the government was doing something about terrorism.

"Congress and the Department of Homeland Security were pushing the states," Beatty said, "and so the states were pushing the locals to work very quickly."

The result: Money was divided mainly by population, with little detailed planning or analysis of where terrorists might attack.

"In the beginning, all of this was rushed," Myrick agreed. "There are a lot of rural legislators, and everybody wanted to get their part of the pie."

In addition to the general homeland security grants that are funneled through states to the counties, the federal government has provided anti-terrorism money to specific state and local agencies to cover everything from increased port security to beefing up bioterror capabilities.

The Observer focused its examination on the homeland security grants because those account for the bulk of the anti-terrorism spending by local governments and have been the focus of criticism by the 9-11 commission and others.

N.C. counties have received about \$70 million from those general grants since 9-11. S.C. counties have gotten about \$50 million.

State officials started by giving every county an equal base grant each year. The rest was split according to population. North Carolina settled on a base of \$10,000 per county.

S.C. counties each got at least \$50,000. "We wanted there to be enough money so that something meaningful could be accomplished," said SLED Chief Robert Stewart, South Carolina's top homeland security official.

The result was that more populated counties, which tend to have more potential targets, actually got far less money to spend per person.

Tyrrell County near the coast -- North Carolina's smallest, with just 4,200 residents -- received \$53,800 from 2002 through this year. That's nearly \$13 for each person, compared with less than \$6 per person in Mecklenburg -- a county of 750,000 that's home to an NFL stadium, the nation's No. 2 banking center, two nearby nuclear power plants and some of the Southeast's tallest skyscrapers.

"Everybody has their own interpretation of a threat," said Charlotte Deputy Fire Chief Jeff Dulin. "Down east, they think it's hog farms. In the Outer Banks, they think it's tourism. But historically, terrorism has been aimed at buildings and symbols, which Charlotte has a lot more of."

But emergency officials in small counties say that if a city is attacked, they'll likely be called on to provide backup and help treat the injured. And it's big-city arrogance, they say, to assume smaller communities don't have needs and risks, too.

"When small towns get hit, that will bring out the fear across America," said Darren Player, assistant Lancaster County, S.C., emergency management director. "Everyone almost expects New York to get hit, but people don't expect it to happen in their back yard."

In many counties, anti-terrorism money has paid to replace old equipment -- such as radios that work on different frequencies and prevent police and firefighters from talking -- and bought gas masks, protective gear and other items rural areas can't afford on their own.

"Some counties, mine included, are struggling just to keep our radios upgraded," said Christy Saunders, the joint emergency management coordinator for sparsely populated Pasquotank and Camden counties in the northeastern corner of North Carolina. "There's no money in the budget to do that."

The Elizabeth City Coast Guard Air Station on the Pasquotank River is the largest in the United States and could be a potential target, Saunders said.

"I think it's real easy just to shrug us off and say we're a real rural community," she said, "but that's a good place to hide."

Critics push change

Charlotte's mayor, who sits on an advisory panel to U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, is a longtime critic of how anti-terrorism money is being spent. McCrory pushed for funding based on risks as far back as October 2001 in a letter to Ridge.

"Everybody can come up with a reason why they can be a potential target," McCrory said in a recent interview. "But the fact is -- and this is the cruel part -- not all of those should be weighted the same way, based on the damage it can do to our nation."

Both state and federal officials are starting to make changes. The 10-county Charlotte region will get an extra \$7.4 million this year from homeland security grants directed at urban areas. And future federal spending is expected to be weighted more according to threat assessments, rather than population.

But some local officials in the Carolinas object to what they see as meddling by state and federal bureaucrats. They say the states are already holding back too much money that should be coming to police and firefighters.

"There seems to be a perception that the counties don't know what they're doing," said Union County emergency management director Pat Beekman. "That's not fair."

Twenty percent of the funding from the federal government can be kept by the states to spend on statewide projects. North Carolina is using most of its share to upgrade the state Highway Patrol radio system and tie it in with local communication systems.

N.C. officials took a different approach to the 2004 grants, splitting about \$33 million for the counties in half. The first \$16.5 million was given out according to population.

Communities were allowed to apply for the other \$16.5 million. A committee of representatives from city and county organizations and state agencies chose the most worthy requests.

The money went to 13 communities that want to improve radio communications. That's the state's No. 1 priority, said Beatty, the N.C. homeland security chief.

Beatty would like to see counties work together as a region, pooling their resources and avoiding duplication. "I think that'd be preferable to dividing it up 100 ways and going in 100 different directions," he said.

His S.C. counterpart, Stewart, is encouraging local officials to come up with countywide projects, such as equipping a haz-mat team for the whole county to share, rather than every fire department buying its own haz-mat gear.

A bill scheduled to be voted on by the U.S. House this month would go even further in making changes. It requires that federal homeland security dollars be distributed according to risk, not population.

States that don't comply could lose their share of the money.

So much to buy

Congress may also take steps to restrict what communities can buy with the money. A Congressional report this spring questioned the legitimacy of items on the approved shopping list, including small airplanes, animal-restraint devices, boats and medication.

State and federal reviewers can ask counties to explain what they bought, but courthouse metal detectors, commercial pickups and laptop computers have all gotten the OK, as long as they can be justified as having something to do with combating terrorism.

Wilkes County, in the mountains northwest of Charlotte, said officials can carry emergency plans and other information in the two Palm Pilots it bought for \$400 each. Gates County on the N.C./Virginia border said it installed security cameras and monitors in its tax office to "deter a possible WMD event."

York County, S.C., spent \$1,600 on mops, buckets and cleaning supplies under the heading "decontamination equipment."

Caswell County -- about 2 1/2 hours northeast of Charlotte -- got a \$4,850 ID card-making device. Now the county's police, fire and emergency agencies can have the same ID badges at a disaster scene.

"I think it does fight terrorism," said Caswell's emergency services director, Jim Gusler. "You look at the 9-11 situation and how some of the terrorists got into the country, and basically it was for a lack of security."

Several counties in the Charlotte region -- Gaston, Cabarrus and York -- bought remote-controlled bomb robots with cameras and grasping arms. Gaston's was used in a recent police standoff. Dare County, along the Outer Banks, bought two underwater remote-controlled vehicles.

Lawmakers said they wanted to let local officials choose on their own what they needed. But that flexibility, critics argue, left the program wide open for abuse.

"Not everybody needs an underwater device for surveillance, but it's on the list," said Jack Midyette, manager of North Carolina's homeland security office. He thinks for the most part, though, that counties have made decisions carefully. "I'm hoping good common sense is prevailing."

Counties in both Carolinas were required to form committees to determine their most likely vulnerabilities and then weigh what to purchase.

"We review every piece of equipment that every county buys, to ensure that it meets the state priorities," SLED's Stewart said. "We put as much planning and thought into this as we could, given the time constraints."

Local officials say they tried to be smart with their purchases, even while juggling requests from their police, fire and ambulance services and other agencies, all of whom had long lists.

"Everybody's got their needs," said Cabarrus emergency management director Bobby Smith. "I've got 17 or 18 agencies all saying, 'I need this,' or, 'I need that,' and I've only got this much funding."

One thing Cabarrus decided to get: two sets of scuba gear for \$5,326. The Sheriff's Office's bomb disposal team has underwater training, Smith said, and the gear will let them check bridges for explosives.

Terrorists probably aren't planning to blow up the county reservoir, Smith acknowledged.

"But if I was working in the World Trade Center in 2001, I would say there was little risk of someone flying planes into my office."

STAFF WRITERS SARAH JANE TRIBBLE AND EMILY ACHENBAUM CONTRIBUTED.