



Tired of Pricey Gas, Police Pump up Bike Patrols

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PITTSBURGH (AP) — Since even the long arm of the law can't rein in fuel prices, the long legs of the law are getting more exercise these days.

Bicycle patrols — a community policing tactic that some law enforcement agencies deemphasized in recent years — are seeing a resurgence as the price of gasoline approaches or surpasses \$4 a gallon across the country.

“You think the car's the great savior of us all, but in urban areas and dense areas, you're probably better off on a bike,” said Chris Menton, an associate professor in the School of Justice Studies at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island who has studied police bike patrols.

In the tiny western Pennsylvania borough of Hollidaysburg, police Chief Jeff Ketner said high gas prices prompted him to resume daily bike patrols several weeks ago.

The department's regular bike patrol had fallen by the wayside and was mainly being used for special events. Ketner resurrected the program after realizing he was on pace to go \$6,000 over budget on the department's four vehicles by the end of the year.

Other departments are making similar decisions. In Clive, Iowa, a Des Moines suburb, police Chief Robert Cox said more officers will bike and walk to save gas.

With gas at more than \$3.50 a gallon, Cox said his department has already spent its 2007-08 budget of nearly \$41,000, which allotted \$2.40 a gallon for 17,000 gallons.

It's the same story in Toledo, Ohio. Chief Mike Navarre said that although the department has long had bikes, he has been telling his officers to use them more, and walk more, to save gas.

Police bike organizations say they have noticed a spike in interest.

“Gas is one of a number of factors that come together in terms of establishing, revitalizing or expanding a unit,” said Maureen Becker, executive director of the Baltimore-based International Police Mountain Bike Association, which provides training and resources to public safety agencies.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many departments started bike patrols, which were then a relatively new concept, said Wes Branham, a police officer with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina. But after the Sept. 11 attacks, he said, they went “totally out the door. Money went elsewhere.”

Now bikes are coming off the rack.

Branham, who heads his department's bike unit, said it began with two officers in 1994 and has grown to 25 full-time officers and 150 part-time riders. The department has about 1,800 officers.



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“Departments are just trying to find more economical ways to patrol,” he said. “A lot of departments are starting to realize they’re getting a lot of bang for their buck with a bike.”

Even departments that implemented bike units for other reasons are noticing gas savings.

In Bedford, Va., the police department bought eight bikes last year and is now saving 200 to 400 gallons of fuel per month, said Lt. Jim Bennett, who’s in charge of the department’s bike unit. The benefit is twofold, he said, with cost savings and increased police visibility.

Trek Bicycle Corp., in Waterloo, Wis., sells more than 1,000 police bikes a year, and sales have been going up for three years, said Stefan Downing, who manages the company’s police bike program. He said rising gas prices have probably been a factor.

The prices of police bikes vary, but they typically cost about \$1,100, Downing said. One special feature: a silent hub that doesn’t make the ratcheting sound that typical hubs make.

Bike patrols do have limitations. Weather can be a problem and bikes can’t be used to transport suspects or chase vehicles.

But advocates say the benefits are worth it. Bikes even help officers keep in shape.

“I keep myself in pretty good shape, but it’s hard,” said Hollidaysburg Sgt. David Gehret, 46. “I’m primarily a desk sergeant ... it was really nice to get out and about.”

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