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B.C. eyes sheriffs to enforce traffic laws; They might save on policing costs, but wider role could stir controversy

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Byline: Lindsay Kines and Rob Shaw

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The B.C. government is considering the use of sheriffs to enforce traffic laws, following Alberta's lead, the Times Colonist has learned.

The Ministry of the Attorney General confirmed in a prepared statement that it has had preliminary discussions on the issue.

"No definitive decisions have been made in regard to such an initiative and additional stakeholder consultation would be required prior to introducing any change in sheriff duties," Shawn Robins, director of communications, said in an e-mail.

He noted, however, that "Alberta has seen some success in expanding the role of sheriffs to help address traffic safety."

It's likely such a move would be controversial, since sheriffs, though armed, do not receive the same level of training as police officers, earn less and are not subject to the B.C. police complaints process.

The idea originated with the sheriffs' union, which most recently brought the proposal to the attorney general in November, said Dean Purdy, chairman of the corrections and sheriffs' services component of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union.

The union has said expanded duties would help with recruiting and retention of sheriffs and offer them more job opportunities.

Sheriffs believe they can take over routine traffic duties, such as running radar traps and issuing tickets, to free cops to tackle more serious crime, said Purdy. They could also help clear the more than 40,000 outstanding warrants in B.C., he said, while providing services at less than half the salary of senior police officers.

"The membership is hopeful this goes through," said Purdy.

B.C. has about 450 sheriffs, whose duties mainly involve escorting prisoners to and from courtrooms, protecting judges and maintaining security at the province's 44 courthouses. They are permitted to carry firearms and receive at least nine weeks of training at the Justice Institute of B.C. -- a quarter of what police receive.

"Obviously, if this was to come into place and the government was to announce it, there would need to be a little bit more training," said Purdy.

B.C.'s police chiefs say they haven't been formally consulted and don't yet have an opinion. They plan to discuss it at their June meeting, said Clayton Pecknold, president of the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police.

Traffic stops, which can be unpredictable and dangerous for officers, aren't just about writing tickets, Pecknold said. "Traffic stops often result in many things such as Criminal Code enforcement, drug enforcement and other things. Those are complex."

He said police officers train frequently in ensuring traffic stops are done safely.

Alberta created a Sheriff Highway Patrol in 2006, with 21 sheriffs enforcing the province's traffic safety act as well as liquor and gaming regulations. By 2008, the unit had grown to more than 100 armed traffic sheriffs.

This year, the Alberta government integrated the unit with the RCMP to improve efficiency, and make it easier for sheriffs to hand off criminal investigations to police.

Rob Gordon, a criminologist at Simon Fraser University and former police officer, believes Alberta set up its Sheriff Highway Patrol to ease transition to a provincial police service, but then decided to stick with the RCMP. "I think what they've ended up with is, quite frankly, a bit of a mess, because they've obviously changed their mind, but they've made some kind of commitment to the sheriff service in Alberta," he said. "So they're stuck with this bizarre hybrid model."

Gordon said the B.C. sheriffs' service has been pushing for expanded duties for some time. But he was surprised to learn the government is taking a hard look at it.

"I didn't know they were actually seriously considering it here," he said.

lkines@tc.canwest.com
rfshaw@tc.canwest.com