

Traffic sheriffs a step closer in B.C.; 13 take road-safety training course

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Byline: Joanne Hatherly
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The B.C. government appears to be pressing ahead with a plan to use sheriffs to enforce traffic laws. While the government denies a decision has been made, the Times Colonist has learned sheriffs are being sent for training in traffic enforcement.

Only two weeks ago, the province confirmed it had begun discussions with police about the expansion of sheriffs' duties to include traffic duties.

At that time, they said the discussions were exploratory and failed to mention sheriffs would be sent for training before police had an opportunity to provide input.

Shawn Robins, director of communications for the Ministry of the Attorney General, confirmed 13 sheriffs from around the province are now at the Justice Institute of B.C. in Vancouver taking an "enhanced" three-week training course in road safety.

"We had a window to train some individuals at the Justice Institute and we took advantage of that window," Robins said.

He was not able to say how much the enhanced training for the sheriffs will cost, or when the three-week program began.

"It was very recently," Robins said.

He denied the province is pushing ahead to install sheriffs in traffic-enforcement roles, saying the sheriffs are being trained to participate in a potential pilot project.

Clayton Pecknold, president of the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police, said the group was not consulted about the training and only learned about it recently.

"I'm surprised in a sense," Pecknold said, "but not surprised that I don't know either. We don't even know entirely what they're training for specifically."

Placing sheriffs in a more active policing role could be controversial. Ordinarily, sheriffs guard judges, escort prisoners at the province's 44 courthouses and maintain security. They carry firearms and receive nine weeks of training at the Justice Institute of B.C.

That's only a quarter of the training police receive, and they're not subject to the B.C. police complaints process.

Bruce Brown, deputy police complaint commissioner at the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner, said the Police Act refers only to police, and not other law-enforcement agencies. He confirmed many police complaints filed by citizens stem from traffic issues.

"We have not been involved in any discussions concerning this," Brown said. "Government would have to amend the Police Act to include [the sheriffs]." The other option is to develop an internal complaint process separate from the OPCC.

The B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police plans to discuss the issue in June.

Dean Purdy, chairman of the corrections and sheriffs' services component of the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union, said the union proposed expanding sheriffs' duties to the attorney general in 2007. "We feel we've been underutilized," Purdy said.

jhatherly@tc.canwest.com

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