

CITY OF COSTA MESA  
POLICE DEPARTMENT

DATE: September 9, 2003  
TO: POLICE DEPARTMENT STAFF  
FROM: Lieutenant Karl Schuler, Traffic Bureau Commander  
SUBJECT: CONVERSION TO BLACK AND WHITE POLICE PATROL VEHICLES

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Police Department Staff recommends that all police patrol vehicles be repainted to a traditional black and white color scheme. Existing budget funds can be utilized for this project through a budget adjustment.

**BACKGROUND:**

In 1953, when the City was incorporated the Police Department utilized black and white painted police patrol vehicles. The City continued to use the black and white scheme on all police patrol vehicles until the early 1970's. At that time, all new police patrol vehicles purchased by the City were painted solid white. There were two (2) main reasons for the changeover to solid white police patrol vehicles. First, was a matter of officer comfort. Police vehicles purchased in the early 1970's did not have air conditioning or power windows. It was felt that the white vehicle would be cooler in the warmer months of the year and would enhance officer comfort. Secondly, it was determined that there was some minor cost savings with a vehicle painted with a one-tone color, white.

Since its transition to solid white police patrol vehicles, the City has elected to continue with the same paint scheme. One reason for continuing with a solid white paint scheme was that many felt it portrayed a softer appearance to the public and was more community oriented. A second reason for the continued deployment of solid white police patrol vehicles was the additional cost related to the black and white paint scheme.

Police staff has recently completed a study as it relates to black and white painted police patrol vehicles. After gathering data from several law enforcement agencies and speaking to our own police officers, police staff believes that changing back to traditional black and white patrol vehicles would make police patrol vehicles more visible to the public and promote a noticeable police presence.

## ANALYSIS:

There has been discussion by many law enforcement administrators as to the pros and cons of solid white versus the traditional black and white painted police patrol vehicles. Police vehicles were, and in many cases are still painted in a two-tone configuration of a black body with white door(s). Traditionally, this style was exclusive to police vehicles and was easily recognizable as a law enforcement vehicle. The reason that police vehicles were painted black and white was to make them stand out from all of the other vehicles using the highway of which most were black. Interestingly, Henry Ford in the 1920's said, "You can order any car in any color as long as it is black." Therefore, adding white doors was a simple way for police vehicles to stand out and be more visible.

The 1980's saw a break from tradition with the introduction of solid white police vehicles with discernible police lettering for identification. Color variations from black and white were intended to reflect community image and distance police stereotypes portrayed in the media.

As mentioned earlier, the City of Costa Mesa used to deploy black and white police patrol vehicles. For reasons such as officer comfort and cost to the City, the move to solid white police patrol vehicles was a logical move at that time. Police staff is recommending converting back to a black and white paint scheme for the City's police patrol vehicles. It should be noted that the conversion to black and white police vehicles would only include those vehicles used by sworn police officers. Four (4) factors should be considered when discussing the paint scheme of police patrol vehicles:

1. Cost
2. Visibility
3. Department Image
4. Deterrence

Of these, only one (1) can be quantifiably measured with available data. This is in the area of cost. The remaining factors, for the most part are left to local preference. However, image is an important factor that may not be immediately measurable. Over time, as the Department continues to emphasize a more open attitude and public involvement with regard to Community Oriented Policing, it may be possible to measure the success of the conversion to black and white police patrol vehicles.

### Cost

Our current fleet of 45 police patrol vehicles is white with distinctive and reflective markings. A local paint and body shop that performs repairs on City owned vehicles has quoted a price of \$300 to repaint each City owned solid white police patrol vehicle to a black and white paint scheme. This would be a total cost of \$13,500. The shop could paint approximately six (6) vehicles per week. The entire fleet could be painted in approximately seven (7) weeks. In addition, as soon as a vehicle is painted, it could be put back into service immediately (no paint curing time required). If the current fleet were to be repainted to black and white, there would be an associated cost to replace

decals removed during the painting process. The cost per vehicle would be no more than \$25. The total cost for replacing all 45 police patrol vehicle decals would be \$1,125.

An advantage to painting the existing police patrol vehicle fleet would be that older vehicles would have new black paint. This single factor would dress up the fleet and allow the community to see cleaner, newer appearing patrol vehicles. In addition, officers would have a stronger sense of pride driving a police vehicle that had a fresh new appearance. The black and white paint scheme would consist of black fenders, black hood, black trunk lid, black bumpers, white door (all four) and white roof.

When purchasing a new police patrol vehicle from the Ford Motor Company, an additional \$450 is charged when ordering each vehicle with the black and white paint scheme. This information was obtained from Costa Mesa Public Services-Fleet Management staff.

### Visibility, Department Image and Deterrence

Police staff was unable to locate any published empirical data relating to police vehicle visibility. For this reason, a staff study was conducted with Orange County law enforcement agencies to determine why agencies employed black and white police patrol vehicles or why not (see attachment #1). Of the twenty-one (21) law enforcement agencies surveyed, eighteen (18) currently utilized black and white police patrol vehicles. Of these eighteen (18) agencies, twelve (12) switched from white, or some other color to black and white. Seven (7) of these agencies have always had black and white police patrol vehicles. One (1) agency had black and white police patrol vehicles, switched to solid white and then returned to black and white. Of the three (3) agencies that have solid white police patrol vehicles, none have any immediate plans to change paint schemes.

The study revealed that the overwhelming majority of the agencies surveyed stated that they deployed black and white police patrol vehicles because they were more visible to the public. Several representatives from the agencies surveyed believed that because of a high visibility factor, the deployment of black and white police patrol vehicles actually gave the appearance of more police patrol vehicles on the street than there really were.

One of the goals of the Costa Mesa Police Department is to increase the visibility of the police officers within the community. One option to achieve this goal would be an increase in staffing levels. This option, however, is not economically feasible with the current fiscal concerns of the City. On the other hand, greater visibility is possible with the deployment of black and white police vehicles. This option is available at a fraction of the cost of additional officers. Having black and white police patrol vehicles that are more visible and approachable to the public is a key element to a successful Community Oriented Policing program.

Other reasons given were that the black and white police patrol vehicles appeared more professional, presented a better public image, are traditional in appearance, are easier for airborne law enforcement to spot, are more distinguishable between police vehicles and private security vehicles. Visitors also more universally recognize them as a police vehicle.

As the Department continues to emphasize Community Oriented Policing, a goal of the Police Department is to “form a partnership with the community.” This starts by creating a positive Department image. The patrol vehicle is the Police Department’s most visible tool and should reflect a professional appearance. The police patrol vehicle should represent the community, which serves the needs of the concerned population. Recently, the City of Peoria, California conducted a public survey regarding the use of black and white police patrol vehicles. The survey revealed a 90% positive approval by those surveyed. The citizens felt the black and whites were more professional looking, more visible, and just better looking overall.

Captain Tim Johnson of the Sunnyvale Police Department reports that in studies from other agencies he has researched; black and white police vehicles are more recognizable by the public. The studies further revealed that people respond positively to the familiar look of police vehicles and find it easier to approach law enforcement personnel. This allows law enforcement to develop stronger ties with the community. Johnson added, “Experience has taught us that red fire engines are more visible and easily recognized by the public as emergency vehicles. These are like brand images that are firmly ingrained in the public’s mind.”

The Edison, New Jersey Police Department recently painted their fleet of police patrol vehicles to black and white. Edison Police Department staff believes that the new black and whites are easier for children to recognize as law enforcement and acts as a greater visible deterrent to criminal activity.

A Louisiana newspaper, the Daily Aztec, recently published an article relating to the use of black and white police vehicles. The article stated, “Marked black and white police vehicles probably do the best job of deterring speeding and other dangerous driving habits. A black and white marked police vehicle really stands out among other cars on the highway.” In addition, “Marked black and white police vehicles deter crime by being highly visible and are easily recognized by the public. This recognition makes it easier for the public to get out of the way in case of an emergency, deters lawbreakers and reminds motorists that traffic laws need to be obeyed.”

Through research conducted on the Internet, police staff discovered that a large number of police departments, nationwide, are returning to a black and white paint scheme for their police patrol vehicles. In addition, one common reason mentioned for the changeover to black and white police patrol vehicles was officer preference. Articles written by several police agencies stated that their officers preferred the traditional look of black and white police patrol vehicles. In some cases, police agencies switched to black and white police patrol vehicles because their officers wanted black and whites.



ATTACHMENT #1

**POLICE PATROL VEHICLE PAINT SCHEMES IN ORANGE COUNTY**

The following is a result of a survey conducted among twenty-one (21) Orange County Law Enforcement Agencies regarding the paint scheme on their patrol vehicles:

Agencies currently deploying black and white patrol units	18
Agencies that currently deploy solid white patrol vehicles	3
Agencies that have always had black and white patrol units	7
Agencies that switched from other colored patrol vehicles to black and white	12
Agencies that had black and white patrol units, switched to solid white, then returned to a black and white color scheme	1
Agencies that have all their civilians, volunteers and cadets driving solid white vehicles	21

COMMON REASONS GIVEN FOR USING BLACK AND WHITE PATROL VEHICLES

More visible to the public and identifiable as a police vehicle	15
Traditional appearance	8
Professional appearance	5
To be Consistent with other Orange County police vehicles	3
Boost officer morale	2