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Security spending questions raised

Nearly \$2 million spent in Greenville County on armored personnel carrier, other items; sheriff says it's necessary

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COLUMBIA -- Greenville County authorities have purchased an armored personnel carrier, a bomb response truck, two All Terrain Vehicles, surveillance cameras, X-ray equipment and a mini-robot, using almost \$2 million worth of federal Homeland Security money awarded Greenville County in the past two years, records show.

The \$219,000 Lenco Ballistic Engineered Armored Response (BEAR) personnel carrier has already been involved in an accident, when it overturned during training, but has been repaired, officials said.

Greenville Police Chief Willie Johnson calls the vehicle a "tank on wheels."

The vehicle is assigned to Greenville County's SWAT team but can be used by other agencies statewide, said Greenville County Sheriff Steve Loftis.

Advertisement Loftis said he thinks all the purchases, which underwent approval by regional and state officials, are vital for the county's preparation for disasters and terrorist events.

"I think we are much better prepared now than we were prior to 9-11," he said. "The Homeland Security money has assisted us in purchasing rather expensive items that normally the (County) Council might not be able to find money for in the budget."

But U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis of Greenville questioned the spending. Inglis said he is not criticizing local officials but believes the federal government should not be trying to equip every local government to fight terrorism.

"The federal government can't remodel every firehouse and buy every new police radio in the name of Homeland Security," he said. "We can't be buying armored personnel carriers when we've got them available in the National Guard. I suppose if you had a source of free money, why not an armored personnel carrier? But it's not really free money."

Inglis said the federal government has spent more than \$95 billion during fiscal years 2004-06 on Homeland Security expenses and now has a \$300 billion deficit.

"Politics being what it is, the money is spread out all over the country," he said. "You've got to wonder whether we're really protecting the high-value targets or whether the money is being spread out to a lot of low-value targets."

Asked whether he considered Greenville a "low-value" target, the congressman replied, "Life is valuable wherever life is. We need good public safety to protect those lives. But you have to realize that there are some

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targets in the country that have a higher probability of being struck by terrorists. You think of tall buildings in our major cities. You think of water systems in our major cities. You think of large tank farms located near major cities."

U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint finds no fault in the Homeland Security grants process.

"The Department of Homeland Security is one of the only federal agencies that does not receive congressional earmarks," he said. "Instead, money is provided through competitive grants and formula funding which states determine how to distribute. Having this type of oversight and competition for federal dollars helps maintain transparency and accountability of taxpayer dollars."

The \$1 million in Homeland Security grants awarded Greenville County last year was second to Richland County, records show.

"I think it's all been dollars well spent," Johnson said. "This money has helped us to be more ready as first responders in our community. We are somewhat like the military now. We are ready to respond at a minute's notice and have the proper equipment to protect ourselves and help protect the community."

Authorities asked to buy the armored personnel carrier to transport law enforcement and emergency personnel "into hostile environments should a protective vehicle be required," according to the county's grant application. The vehicle is equipped with radiation and gas/vapor detection capabilities, according to the county's application.

Loftis said the vehicle can be used for any incident in the region, eliminating the need for SLED to provide such equipment.

According to Lenco Armored Vehicles, the company that manufactures the BEAR, the vehicle can be used for anything from evacuating civilians in hot zones to protecting soldiers in the line of fire.

Recently, a BEAR vehicle was used to evacuate a Florida nursing home during a hurricane, said Jim Massery, Lenco's government sales manager. "They weren't afraid of it blowing over," he said of the armored vehicle.

The Sheriff's Office said they needed the BEAR because the converted armored car the SWAT team had been using wasn't meeting their needs.

"We don't keep a tally every time the vehicle is used, but every time the SWAT team gets a call, the truck goes with them," said Master Deputy Michael Hildebrand, a Sheriff's Office spokesman.

The BEAR's accident happened when an officer overturned it during a training exercise, Hildebrand said. The SWAT vehicle was damaged on the outside, but it was repaired, he said. The officer was not injured in the accident.

The vehicle can be used during hostage situations, when suspects barricade themselves or to serve warrants, he said.

The BEAR can transport 15 officers at a time, Massery said, and can evacuate 25-30 people if need be. Information about the vehicle's dimensions, weight or how it runs are not public information because the BEAR is being used in the war in some dangerous spots, he said.

Massery said the BEAR is unique for more than its high-tech P.A. system. It is designed so that elderly people and small children can get in and out with ease. He added that his company's model is about half as expensive as one built by the military and should last 20 to 25 years.

Also scheduled to be purchased with \$255,287 in Homeland Security money is an "incident response vehicle" to be used by emergency medical services personnel for hazardous materials and rescue response. The truck

can carry heavy structural rescue equipment as well as equipment used to respond to hazardous materials incidents, according to the county's grant application.

The rescue truck, which looks like a large fire department truck, has nine bays for storing rescue and hazardous materials response equipment, said Capt. Tim Gault, director of special operations for Greenville County's Emergency Medical Services.

The truck will end up costing about \$18,000 more than the grant amount, which will be paid out of funds set aside in the county's budget, he said. Gault said the truck will be delivered sometime next year and stationed at the Boiling Springs Fire Department on Pelham Road so it can be sent quickly to any area of the county. It will replace a converted beverage truck that the county used as a rescue vehicle, he said.

Law Enforcement equipment purchased with the grants, according to the county's applications, include \$31,312 for a remote video scope for the county's SWAT team; \$25,000 for an X-ray machine to look at suspicious packages; \$34,000 for protective suits and helmets; \$44,000 for surveillance cameras; \$57,000 for 800 MHz radios for local police departments; \$15,660 for two All Terrain Vehicles and trailers; and \$200,000 for a bomb response vehicle, a Mini Andross II bomb robot, a bomb detection video scope and a wireless radio communications system for use by explosives personnel.

The fire and emergency response equipment purchased include \$100,000 for 10 mobile data computers for EMS supervisors; \$120,000 for medical supplies and drugs, \$35,000 for a decontamination unit to use on spine boards after a weapons of mass destruction event; \$14,328 for personal protective equipment for fire personnel; \$109,454 for environmental testing equipment for area fire departments in the event of a weapons of mass destruction event; and \$48,026 for rescue equipment for local fire departments, according to the grant records.

Each of the grant requests must first go through a county committee which includes the sheriff, city fire chief, city police chief, and the county emergency manager.

The grants then must be approved by the Upstate's regional counterterrorism committee, which then sends the proposals to the state's Homeland Security Department, said Tom McDowell, chairman of the Upstate's regional council

Some amounts are targeted toward regional teams of agencies for areas such as search and rescue and chemical, explosives, biological or radiological threats, officials said.

Until this year, each county received \$50,000 in Homeland Security grants and a pro-rated grant based on the county's population, McDowell said.

Now, with no funding amounts set, the counties and the state have undergone a needs assessment process, McDowell said. The area where the state lacks most is communications, he said.

Inglis said Homeland Security spending highlights the need for members of Congress to discuss the larger issue of who does what in government.

"Otherwise we end up with a federal government that federalizes everything and takes over fire protection, police protection, everything," he said.
