

Driving force



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Campbell County commissioners are taking aim at a perk for 35 employees that allows them to drive county-owned vehicles to and from work — a practice that cost taxpayers at least \$54,000 a year in gasoline alone.

Commissioners have been questioning that practice even before gas prices increased, wondering why the county should pay for the 120,500 miles in travel for those employees to drive to and from work.

Each employee has a justification for the perk, but now county commissioners are questioning who really needs to take the vehicle home, and who takes it home because it's convenient.

"We asked, 'Are these vehicles being used for the county?'" said Commissioner Amir Sancher. "The answer was 'no.' We need to change it to 'yes.' These vehicles are getting to be a large cost. It's increased every department budget because of the price of gas."

In almost every case, those vehicles are pickup trucks or SUVs.

Since 2006, a policy has been developed by Fleet Manager Rod Warne to help commissioners efficiently track the use of county vehicles, replace them as needed and provide a unified vehicle guideline for the various county departments. A take-home policy has been developed as part of that.

County commissioners asked Warne to conduct a survey among the county department heads of which vehicles could be eliminated as a take-home vehicle, expecting the department heads to help cut down on some of the costs. They didn't. Justifications were made for all 35 vehicles.

That didn't sit well with the commissioners when they learned about it at a Thursday morning workshop.

"No one said 'I don't need the vehicle,'" Sancher said. "No one followed our philosophy. That for me is a disappointment."

Now, county commissioners are considering taking all take-home privileges away, insisting that each department chief re-apply for them in front of the board. A decision is expected to be made at the commission meeting July 15.

"I suspect part of the manager's hesitation to justify their employees is they can't justify their own take-home vehicles," Chairmen Dan Coolidge said.

Different justifications

Probably the biggest controversy within the county is who should be able to routinely take home a vehicle after work hours for the purpose of responding to their jobs. Warne estimated in March that about \$54,000 a year could be saved if the county stopped allowing its employees to take vehicles home, but that was before gas had reached record prices. It has increased \$1 a gallon since then.

The commissioners' analysis of the economic costs of the take-home vehicles and cutting back on them seems to be a good idea, said Parks and Recreation Director Dave McCormick, who drives a county vehicle home.

Eight Parks and Recreation Department employees take vehicles home and all for different reasons. With several different locations within the city and the Town of Wright, and hours that start at 5 a.m. and end at 10 p.m., sometimes it's easier to finish a task and head straight home, McCormick said.

At Bell Nob Golf Course, both the grounds superintendant and the supervisor drive home vehicles because they have to check the grounds periodically for vandalism, which has included people driving onto the course at night.

"If they take them away and there's no vehicles that go home, hey, we'll live with it," McCormick said. "We'll still do our job and we'll still provide the best service we can."

But some workers hesitate to find positives.

"If they want them back, fine, it just creates problems time-wise, said Gary Lowry, director of the Road and Bridge Department. "It's handy to respond to a scene from their home in an emergency."

Lowry said the four people in his department who have take-home vehicles are called out five or six times a month. In the winter time, it's to sand the road. In the summer, they get called out for fires. They can be called out for severe storms or bad cattle guards. With some of the employees living 10 miles outside the city, it wastes time during an emergency to drive in to pick up a vehicle.

The county maintenance employees with take-home vehicles are called out a few times a month to respond to fire panels, security panels, alarms. The tools they need are kept in their trucks. But they still take them home even when they're not on-call.

"We thought it was a condition with employment," said Vern Fundenberger, facilities manager. "It was more like a convenience."

Airport employees with take-home vehicles get stranger calls: remove geese on the runway, said Jay Lundell, airport executive director. But they're called more frequently when lights run out on the runway or a flight is scheduled to depart. The take-home trucks carry radios, light bulbs and hand tools for on-call jobs.

"Our position is unique because he has coverage from 6 a.m. to midnight and someone has to be present for every flight," Lundell said.

Since there's a lot of back and forth driving from work to home, there's waste of gas and wear and tear to the vehicle. Although Lundell has driven a county vehicle for 20 years, he says he won't get upset if it's taken away.

What the policy says

The proposed policy that the commission will use as they consider who should have take-home vehicles lists simple justifications:

- ON CALL: Employees who have to report to a specific job site on a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week, basis would be likely candidates. But the number of call outs also would factor into the equation. Employees who live 20 miles or farther away from town also wouldn't qualify because it defeats the purpose of a quick response. Most of the county employees who are on-call include maintenance workers who have to respond in case of a break, or supervisors who are notified of an alarm or an immediate problem.

- EMERGENCY VEHICLES: Sworn deputies, investigators and any other sworn officer in the Sheriff's Office are all provided county vehicles and are subject to 24-hours on-call, said Undersheriff Scott Matheny. About 59 sheriff's vehicles are taken-home by their drivers. Technically this is the same as the on-call rule, but Matheny said there is a difference between an emergency vehicle being on-call and another county employee being on-call. When a tornado hit Wright in 1995, Matheny said all available officers were called in to respond to the area. Also, each officer must be available as they run a pandemic flu exercise within the county. Commissioners said Thursday all emergency vehicles are exempt from the policy for now.

"It's faster for us to respond from our house to the incident than to the Sheriff's Office and then to the incident," Matheny said.

- MONEY AND PROTECTION: If the employee never goes to a central office during the day, diverting them to an office would increase the cost of transportation. The justification that paying miles to the employee for traveling to and from a work site will cost more than providing the vehicle is also a factor. Also, if there is a possibility of vandalism to the vehicle if it's left at a work site would also qualify the employee to take it home.

Warne said people who abuse the privilege of take-home vehicles generalize that they are not abusing it.

For example, a person who is on-call might think that they have to be in the vicinity of the vehicle at all times and feel the need to take it to a ball game.

But within the Sheriff's Office, deputies are not allowed to use their squad cars for any type of personal use when they are off duty. They have to use personal vehicles for grocery trips or ball games and then return to their home for the vehicle when they get called out, Matheny said.

More like the city

At the City of Gillette, only eight people outside of the Police Department are allowed to take home a vehicle. Each of those eight people are on-call for maintenance issues or supervisor notification, said City Fleet manager Curtis Marking.

Others are given a vehicle allowance to use their personal vehicles while on-call, Marking said.

The city went through the same process of dropping most of its take-home vehicles back in the 1980s, deciding instead to use reimbursements.

Warne has worked closely with Marking in developing the county's policy because it works well in replacing the vehicles by building an account on their depreciation. But in order to get the best bang for the county's dollar, accountability is Warne's priority.

"We have to make sense and be accountable to the taxpayers," Warne said.

Not everyone is going to like losing an unofficial benefit to working with the county, but Warne thinks the employees will realize that in a world with \$4-a-gallon gasoline prices, even the county is feeling the pinch.