



Posted on Wed, Jan. 23, 2008

## Towns issue bills for police services

By JEFFREY McMURRAY  
Associated Press Writer

The self-proclaimed "Friendship City" has decided it's tired of being a doormat for motorists from neighboring communities.

When police in this Cincinnati suburb respond to an accident in which an out-of-town driver is at fault, the city plans to start issuing a bill: \$14 for the first 30 minutes that an officer is on the scene and an additional \$7 for every 15 minutes thereafter. Use of a police car brings an additional \$154 charge.

Erlanger is just the latest example of cities using such methods to try to recover the costs of providing police services. Most of the communities have been small towns, but medium-sized cities such as Ocala, Fla., are also poised to act, and even metropolitan areas have expressed interest.

"There has to be a way to obtain some funding to keep providing these services that doesn't come out of the pockets of the people who own a house in Erlanger," Mayor Tom Rouse said.

Erlanger, with 17,000 residents, is a heavily traveled crossroads where four major highways intersect. According to city records, 82 percent of the accidents police responded to in 2007 did not involve an Erlanger resident.

A review by The Associated Press of the 343 vehicle crashes in Erlanger in November and December showed that only 49 were carrying someone from the city.

Most of the bills for police services go to motorists' insurance companies. In the first year, the system is expected to generate about \$100,000.

But critics of the plan say it could hurt the very people Erlanger wants to attract: Out-of-towners who regularly pass through the city with money to spend.

"Of all the bureaucratic moneymaking schemes I've heard of, this is the worst," wrote John Ryan, a resident of neighboring Covington, in an e-mail to the mayor.

Ryan's note, obtained through an open-records request, points out that Covington technically could retaliate by charging a \$50 toll on its Ohio River bridge to Cincinnati. But the town won't because it would be "economically and ethically stupid to punish a person who uses something that so obviously promotes economic growth."

The Erlanger mayor insists interstate highways don't draw much money to his town. He said most travelers use another exit to buy gas or fast food because of the city's confusing highway connector.

Across the river in Ohio, a Dayton-based company called Cost Recovery Corp. offers to handle the billing for Erlanger and 80 other towns that try to collect police costs.

"They're trying to maintain some kind of quality of service and a decent response time to keep people safe," company President Regina Moore said. "It's getting tougher and tougher to do that. You have all this extraneous demand, and it's not funded."

More than half of insurance companies have paid when they get a bill, Moore said, and some are actually supportive because they acknowledge police are providing a service by determining who is to blame for a wreck. Without that service, she contends, insurance premiums would go through the roof because providers would need to reconstruct every accident themselves.

But Jeff Brewer, a spokesman for the Property Casualty Insurers Association of America, cautions that

premiums could still increase if many towns begin issuing bills.

"It's one that started off as an odd nuisance, where you'd run into it in a particular municipality, but it is growing," Brewer said. "If you tack on \$200, or in some cases \$1,000 for each accident, it doesn't take a lot of accidents to see a major increase in the overall cost consumers would ultimately end up having to pay."

Agents for Kentucky Farm Bureau, the largest property and casualty insurer in the state, usually refuse to pay the charges.

"Insurance policies will cover you when you're liable or negligent. But in this situation, unless there's some sort of hazardous spill or something, there's no liability," spokesman Greg Kosse said.

The city council in Ocala, Fla., a community of 55,000 people near busy Interstate 75, approved a plan Tuesday to seek more than \$350,000 in annual reimbursements for police services. Moore said she has also had inquiries from metropolitan areas, including Tampa and Boston.

In Erlanger, Police Chief Marc Fields said he initially opposed the measure because he was concerned people might suspect police of targeting nonresidents for fault in accidents as a money grab.

Fields said the accident statistics changed his mind, but he wants to ensure the program does not expand into something larger.

"I will work tirelessly to make sure it ends here," he said. "I don't want people to be scared that we're going to charge for a burglary that has occurred at their house."

---

© 2007 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>