

The New Look of our “Next Generation” Police Cars

Like most of you when I travel around now days I notice that it’s a lot harder to pick out a police patrol car from the other cars on the roadway. For the last 10 or 15 years the Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptors and the Chevrolet Impalas had become the two premier police patrol vehicles working on patrol in the United States. The Ford’s had the rear wheel drive and Chevrolet had the front wheel drive. Since Ford had limited their Crown Victoria market these last few years to police patrol vehicles or taxi cabs it was quite easy to “pick out” a moving squad car. The Chevy Caprice looked somewhat like other cars on the road but with a little practice a person could get pretty good at picking out the Caprice on patrol in the distance as well.

Recently with Ford deciding to end their production of the Crown Victoria and Chevrolet looking at refining their law enforcement vehicles picking out a moving police patrol vehicle just got a lot harder. Over the years, as I travel I appreciate the look of many of the new cars on the road, I first see their color and notice their shape and then like many of you I determine in my own personal way whether the car looks good to me or not.

When it comes to a good law enforcement vehicle style points are a distant second to the law enforcement needs of a department. Different needs dictate the model chosen by the department. In a big city where maneuverability is tight, a smaller sleeker model might be chosen for its tight cornering ability or ability to blend in with other vehicles. Since the police department was fairly close you could sacrifice storage space for performance. This is why you may see the smaller squad cars in a big city or tighter patrol area. In the county where you may be 20 or more miles from your base of operation and you are patrolling more open road where the police patrol coverage area is a lot larger, you need a bigger vehicle to haul the equipment needed for the different calls you would respond to. A bigger vehicle with rear wheel drive may also “hold the road” better, especially on gravel roads or a surface off the road that is not paved.

The discussions and debates regarding police squad cars over the years have become classic. Some prefer front wheel drive for snow and ice while others profess that rear wheel drive gives the driver more control for quick acceleration or at high speed driving. Since I have been employed in Richland County I have driven both a front wheel drive squad car and a rear wheel drive police vehicle. Now, the new police vehicles we have received have all-wheel drive.

In my time here in Richland County I have driven police patrol cars of many makes and styles. I remember that the sheriff's department drove the big police station wagons of the early 1970's and I drove the Ford Ltd's of the mid 1970's, the Pontiac Le Mans and Buick LeSabre in the late 1970's and then the Chevrolet Impalas of the early and mid 1980's and of course the one or two years drove the Ford Taurus. When the Taurus proved way too small for what we needed, we went to the Dodge Diplomats and when they went out of production we switched to what we have mostly today, the Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptors. In early 1996 when I became Sheriff, I inherited Sheriff Fred Schram's red Crown Victoria which eventually was replaced by the smaller, front wheel drive Chevrolet Impala that I drive today. To say I have experience with many different types of police patrol vehicles I believe would be an accurate statement.

With all the police vehicles I drove, the main goal was to carry the equipment needed to get the job done and also hold the road while performing the varied duties required of a police patrol officer. This is why I am very excited about the change to the all wheel drive utility vehicles we are now seeing on the road conducting police patrol. While the Ford Crown Victoria had been a good solid patrol vehicle for many, many years Ford decided to stop their production in 2011. Many law enforcement departments, like us began to study the next generation of squads that would soon be released. Like most administrators I researched what I felt would be the best vehicle for what we need.

The all wheel drive vehicle also has more room for the patrol officer and the equipment that is now normally found in a patrol car. The police radio, the lap top computer, the radar set, the electrical panel that controls the red/blue lights, the siren and the public address speakers all take up a lot of space. In addition, the specifications of the new all wheel drive utility vehicle say they will get 20% better gas mileage and a higher resale value. The all wheel drive feature also provides the patrolling officer with more mobility in the winter storms and off road which we need when responding to calls for service.

As I talk with my deputies who are using the two utility cars we now use, their initial reviews are very encouraging. They report the vehicle is sound and handles the road very well. They also like the extra room for the required equipment. I can now see why the production of the utility squad car was encouraged and the old Crown Victoria's which had been the benchmark for the last 10-15 years was set aside.

So as you travel about and notice sometimes too late, these new style of police patrol vehicles that look to me like a cross between a small van and an old station wagon, know that a lot of research and planning went into this “next generation” of police vehicles. We now have two and the City of Richland Center has one, I am very confident that this new generation of police vehicle will become the new “work horse” for law enforcement in the future much like all the other models I described earlier.

If you have any input on this subject or would like to contact me, please do not hesitate to call me at the Richland County Sheriff’s Department at 647-2106.

Sheriff Darrell Berglin