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Dixon concerned about use of city cars

Two-thirds of take-home vehicles leave city at night

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Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon said she was not aware that some city employees use their take-home cars for daily trips to Dover, Del., and Alexandria, Va., and expressed "some concerns" about the length of taxpayer-funded commutes.

The Baltimore Sun reported Tuesday that 247 city workers take city vehicles home at night, and almost two-thirds of those are parked in suburban counties or out of state. In the Police Department, more take-home cars are assigned to employees who live in Pennsylvania than to those who live in Baltimore.

"I do have some concerns with how far the cars go and it is something that we are going to continuously tweak as we move this process forward," Dixon said after a City Hall news conference. She stressed that her administration has already reduced the city's fleet of take-home cars, and that 83 police officers lost their vehicles this year because of budget cuts.

The list of vehicles and their daily travel logs were made available after Councilman William H. Cole IV requested them during a budget hearing. The report showed that the city pays \$313,000 annually for fuel for commuting.

Cole said he does not want city cars to leave the state, and said he plans to meet with the mayor early next week to discuss policy changes.

City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake was also disturbed by the take-home vehicles: "We were able to shine a light on where we can do better, one of those areas is with take-home cars for officers," Rawlings-Blake said. She wants the cars to be used as an incentive to draw officers into the city.

Most of the take-home vehicles are assigned to the Police Department. Of those 149 vehicles, 22 make a daily round trip to Pennsylvania, 107 go to suburban Maryland counties, one goes to Dover, and one goes to Alexandria. Fifty of the vehicles are paid for by the federal grants.

Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III defended his department's practices. He said he does not see a take-home vehicle as a "luxury item" because of the demands he places on his command staff, requiring top brass to return to the city at a moment's notice.

"You can't say on one hand that the problems in Baltimore are big and 'we want you to do something about it,' but we want to diminish the ability to get that done. ... I can't expect them to ride bicycles to work." Bealefeld said.

Baltimore County has a smaller Police Department, but issues 30 more take-home police cars than Baltimore. Anne Arundel and Howard counties also issue take-home cars, but in most cases do not let the vehicles leave the county and prohibit them from leaving the state.

The commissioner stressed that there is no requirement that city officers live in Baltimore and said that the vehicles offer some form of compensation to employees who are paid less than their suburban counterparts.

Bealefeld would not say if the two employees living in Virginia and Delaware would keep their cars. "I am not going to box myself in," Bealefeld said. "The mayor has the ultimate say. I'm sure that we'll have much more discussions on this."