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Should New Haven Give Cars To City Employees?

By Betsy Yagla

Monday, November 22, 2010 2:36pm

Taxpayers are footing the bill for city employees' cars



betsy yagla photo

An off-duty New Haven police detective crashed his patrol car into a female bicyclist.

The accident took place in 2004 in West Haven. The cyclist, who hurt her shoulder, wrist and cracked several teeth, filed suit in 2006.

Although then-Det. Andrew Muro was off duty at the time of the accident, the City of New Haven defended him and recently settled the lawsuit for \$26,000 because the accident involved a city car.

What was a city-owned car doing in the suburbs? Muro is one of several high-ranking city officials with unrestricted access to take-home cars that taxpayers pay to gas up, maintain and insure.

Nationally, cities and states are reexamining employee car use because of severe budget shortfalls. In 2009, Gov. Jodi Reil issued an executive order to cut the state's fleet of cars by 20 percent. She also created stricter rules on when and why state employees can use a car and took away take-home cars from agency commissioners.

In New Haven (excluding the Board of Education) there are 52 employees with take-home cars. According to IRS rules, they're supposed to file monthly mileage reports, declaring the length of their round-trip commute and how many times they made that trip each month. They're also asked to report any personal miles, like grocery store trips. (In a six-month time period, only three city employees reported and paid for any personal use.)

Monthly reimbursement payments — at the IRS-set rate of 50 cents per mile — vary widely, between \$30 and \$250 depending on how long an employee's commute is.

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“But it adds up,” says Jeffrey Kerekes, a budget watchdog and co-founder of New Haven Citizens Action Network. “It’s easy to rack up serious money on your car driving it around. And, there’s an expense with these cars — servicing them, insuring them.”

One city employee’s car — a Chevy Cavalier — had to be towed to New Haven’s garage because it was vandalized.

Despite several requests, City Hall did not provide figures for how much it spends on gas, maintenance and insurance for these cars. City Hall says it only knows the total vehicle cost, which includes dump trucks, street sweepers, fire engines and lawn mowers, but did not provide that number.

Of the 52 employees with take-home cars, 31 received letters in June announcing they were eligible for a take-home car and they should begin reporting their mileage. But most of those 31 employees had already had access to a city car for months if not years.

Some of those 31 are police officers, exempt by IRS rules from reporting and reimbursing mileage. Others were Health Department officials, exempt by union contract.

That leaves 10 people — three firefighters and seven city department heads and assistants — who have been using city cars but not reporting their mileage or reimbursing the city for those miles.

Of the 21 employees who had been reporting mileage, 14 were late on their reimbursements to the city.

“In the scope of their duties, this is small potatoes,” says Rob Smuts, New Haven’s chief administrative officer. (Although Smuts is allowed a city car, he uses his own.)

Due to layoffs three years ago, Smuts says, the city no longer has an audit division that pays close attention to car reports, personal miles or late payments.

Smuts says New Haven is looking to reign in car costs. In the last three years, the city has junked and not replaced four cars, six dump trucks and three street sweepers.

In addition, Smuts says, the city is hoping to renegotiate union-mandated access to take-home cars.

In those cases, Smuts says, “We want to look at whether it makes sense to provide a person with a car or to reimburse them for using their own car [for city business].”

Taking away cars for department heads is off the table, Smuts says, because some are expected to respond to emergencies at any hour of the day or night. Others are expected to work much longer than the standard 9-5 workday and travel within the city a lot, Smuts says.

Kerekes doesn’t buy it. “This is defiantly a benefit. It costs me money to insure my car and pay taxes on it. So if this is an employee benefit and their position doesn’t warrant it, then we’re all paying for that.”

“I think we should look at the issue,” says alderman Jorge Perez. “Sure there are cases where it’s totally justified, but I’m not sure that every single instance [of car use] meets that requirement.”

Perez says the city needs to seriously consider whether city officials should be given city-paid-for cars.

“The bigger issue here is not the gas, oil and filter,” says Perez, “but the insurance and the liability,” like the \$26,000 payout to the West Haven bicyclist.

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