

NEWS

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Councilmen 'try out' Tasers

Councilmen Cero, Litzow take a hit

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Two City Councilmembers recently volunteered to get Tasered by police. After doing so, both Councilmembers agreed that it was incapacitating, though not very painful, and was a safe alternative to other uses of police force.

During a public safety commission meeting earlier this month, Councilmembers Mike Cero and Steve Litzow "took the Taser for a ride" at City Hall. Mercer Island police chief Ed Holmes said the department is considering using Tasers to provide officers with an additional safe tool of non-lethal force. The department needs Council approval before doing so.

A Seattle police officer demonstrated how the technology works on an Island officer prior to the Councilmembers.

"You literally lose control of your body and drop to the ground," said Councilmember Litzow. "It's a weird sensation. It's not pain, but it's also not very comfortable. You have no control of your limbs, but the second after he releases the trigger, you're fine."

Councilmember Cero said he thought the use of Tasers was a controversial issue and he wanted the experience and perspective of what a Taser felt like so that he could make an informed decision if it came to a Council vote.

"I recognized the benefits of police having another tool in their spectrum of force and this provides protection to both the officer and the person they are going after," said Cero.

Litzow said he volunteered for the experience to make sure Tasers would be safe if used on citizens.

"The reason we did it was that if we are supporting officers using this, we want to make sure [Tasers] are safe," said Litzow.

After the experience, Cero said he thought the use of Tasers was safe and would help the police and offenders.

"If one of my kids goes south on me, I would have no reservation of police using it on my kid if they so deserve it," Cero said. "What I found most impressive was that the moment the officer took his finger off the trigger, I was good to go down to Starbucks and have a coffee. As opposed to getting a billy club used on me, I'd prefer the Taser."

Island police have considered Taser use in the past, hosting another demonstration to some Councilmembers three years ago. Then, numerous questions arose and the police continued to research the subject. Today, Holmes said Tasers help solve a safety issue by providing a better option of police force.

"It's a tool that is out there designed to keep everybody safe, whether a citizen or an officer," said Holmes. "There's an increased possibility of injury when applying force in any fashion, but Tasers can help avoid the types of physical confrontations we have encountered in the past."

Most departments in the area use Tasers, and Island police are developing a proposal for permission to use Tasers from the Council. Holmes said the entire department would be trained and no officer would be authorized to carry a Taser unless they completed comprehensive training.

"We will have a very clear policy on appropriate use and a clear policy on training and accountability," the chief said.

After the demonstration, Cero and Litzow agreed that Tasers were safe.

"The strongest benefit is that there is no side effect to it," said Litzow. "My feeling it is much safer than stopping a confrontation using a hand-to-hand combat club or gun. A comparable alternative is pepper spray, and that gets everywhere and to get it off takes another two hours, a much greater side effect than a Taser."

There has been controversy since Tasers were introduced across the nation, as deaths have occurred following the use of the device and allegations of misuse. Taser International states its device produces 50,000 volts to create a spark that transmits electricity through two inches of clothing, but only short pulses of 400 volts actually enter the body. Island police would phase in Tasers, possibly seeking more units in the future. The details are being worked out, Holmes said, and a well-thought presentation would come before the Council.

While Litzow said it was great fun to try out the Taser, he conceded he was not looking forward to taking another ride.

"It is definitely a deterrent," he said. "Getting Tasered is not something you want to be doing. But the lack of an after-effect or side effect gives it a huge advantage."

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