

Troopers make case against civilian traffic flaggers

Boston Herald

BY HILLARY CHABOT

Sep 13, 2008

State police troopers busted thugs, snatched residents from roaring fires and prevented roadway mayhem while on construction details - a public safety service they warn could end if budget-conscious state officials approve a measure allowing cheaper civilian flaggers to take over some jobs.

In new figures obtained by the Herald, state police assisted in nearly 2,400 incidents while on details in the past eight months - including nabbing a one-woman wrecking machine engaged in a high-speed domestic dispute with her longtime girlfriend on Interstate 93 in July.

"No matter what anyone says, by taking state troopers off our roadways, you're going to have a negative effect on public safety," said State Police Association of Massachusetts head Rick Brown.

Brown also criticized Gov. Deval Patrick for pushing for the change, which runs counter to the freshman governor's pledge of putting 1,000 officers on the street.

But Patrick vowed to preserve public safety while saving taxpayers up to \$7.2 million a year, according to state estimates.

"We have other initiatives to get police on the beat," Patrick said yesterday. "We will have civilian flaggers on Massachusetts roads following public safety guidelines."

Police unions - ramping up for the only public hearing on the issue, scheduled for Monday evening - compiled 2,378 incidents over the past eight months where state officers have laid down the law while on details. They made 135 arrests or citations, handed out 1,250 tickets and assisted drivers in 116 crashes.

One officer on a detail earlier this year dashed into a burning apartment building in Brookline and dragged out a woman who had collapsed in the thick smoke.

State police on another construction detail in July managed to box in and arrest driver Sandra Howes, 42, who reportedly zig-zagged across I-93 at speeds of 80 miles an hour during a fight with her fiancée.

The regulations would encourage use of flaggers on roads with a speed limit of 45 mph or less, and would even use flaggers on roads above that speed limit if there is lower traffic or if jersey barriers dividing the project. Flaggers could also be used on some state-run projects on municipal roads.

After Monday's public hearing at the state Transportation Building, state officials will finalize the regulations, and the reforms are expected to take effect Oct. 3.