

The Quest for the Traffic Unit

Part 2 of 3 in the Series

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In the last article, we discussed why having a Traffic Unit is necessary. There are two options in the purchase of a Unit – new or used. This article will be about obtaining a used vehicle, and will illustrate the ordeal of one group who got a used vehicle. They wish to remain nameless – their embarrassment is high, so we'll call them the Roller Township Crew (RTC).

The RTC FD has two engines and a tanker. There used to be an ambulance, but they merged or went under or something leaving the empty bay. The Fire Police are all over 55 and overall the FD isn't terribly well off. They went out and bought the first vehicle they found.

The vehicle was an old ambulance, and had been used for a few years as a traffic unit, so they figured they were in like Flint. Cost –\$2500, “fully equipped”. Cool!

Of course, it didn't get them home without dying. Seems the reason the other FD was happy to part with it is it wasn't reliable.

Once home with the \$3,000 repair bill, they sent it away for paint and decals. Nearly \$5,000 later, because of rust repairs and an old bodywork job, the truck went to the mechanic's again, this time for state inspection. Brakes and kingpins were replaced, plus a bunch of other stuff (\$4500), but the oil leak was left for the future. After all, oil dry for the bay floor isn't that expensive.

The vehicle came “fully equipped”. No, RTC didn't have to rent a Dumpster, but the politically-correct way of classifying the “gifted” material is that it “wasn't suitable”. Use your imagination. For grins and giggles, the local PSP weight team was around one day and the *empty* vehicle was weighed. Empty, they had 700 pounds of allowance before they were at the vehicle's weight limit. Cones weigh from 7 to 12 pounds, each. This FD, fortunately, had the 7-pound variety, with 50 cones. Of course, this is 350 lbs of their 700 allowed. Once signs, some basic tools, flares, flashlights, extra vests, and some other basic equipment was added, they were against their maximum weight.

Next they discovered that diesel engines are direct inject. They discovered this after the truck wouldn't always start for calls. Another healthy crunch from their FD's operating budget for injector replacement...

Someone had replaced the alternator a few years ago – probably a smaller output than the ambulance had – maybe not. The old incandescent flashing lamps were the 80 watt variety, with 11 total fixtures. Add a older sealed-beam lightbar with lots of bulbs, and a bunch of guys who (like a lot of other responders) don't know you should “back down” your lights on scenes when you're sitting for hours, and the truck would often die. Can you say jump-starting became common, replace the battery, and of course, another alternator, too.

I won't bore you with all of the nitty-gritty details, but they spent over \$22,000 on the truck in its first year. To compound the FD's "concerns", the truck wasn't getting out to calls (even if it would start). Seems most of the Fire Police don't have EVOC, and the ones that did really weren't that comfortable with the large, bulky, lumbering truck. After a multi-alarm structure fire occurred where the truck sat; not one, but *two* other Traffic Units came to their rescue. The FD sold the Traffic Unit, for \$1000 to a plumber. To add insult to injury, the plumber sold the lightbar, siren, speakers, *and the brand-new Fire Police radio* for the \$1,000 that he spent.

I wish I could tell you I made this story up. I wish I could tell you I've only heard this same story once. Unfortunately, I can't. So how can you prevent these kind of horror stories?

When you decide to buy used, take your time! Don't take someone else's junk just because it's cheap – you'll pay in the long run. Hopefully, you're friendly with a local mechanic. Have the mechanic thoroughly go over any prospect you may be considering (pay him for this!). Some old ambulances may be worth their price, but they almost always have a weight penalty – the inability to haul lots of weight. The box weight and interior compartments cause this.

A better solution may be to forget an old ambulance, and purchase a cube van, utility box (looks like an ambulance but lacks the interior cabinetry), an SUV, or a regular work van. Have it thoroughly inspected by your mechanic friend, and figure all of the "hidden" expenses. Also, some truck dealers will have former fleet vehicles that were usually taken better care of, available with an inexpensive warranty.

The vehicle may be white, which is a good choice for a response vehicle, or it may be dark green or brown, which isn't so good. Unless your Fire Trucks are dark green or brown, get it painted. Getting the vehicle painted can be expensive, yet it will do wonders for the vehicle's appearance. Reflective striping is an absolute must! Don't scrimp on this, get the high-visibility stuff, with plenty of contrast and use a design that allows the vehicle to still remain looking like a vehicle. Murals and wrap-around designs may look impressive, but show me one – just one – study that states this makes the vehicle safer... Various articles on this topic have been in many trade magazines lately, go back and read a few. Don't forget to put the reflective rear chevrons on the vehicle – these slope outward toward the bottom (up-side-down V's) at 45-degree angles.

A former ambulance usually comes with lights and a siren. A different vehicle, such as a cube van or plumber's truck, probably wasn't an emergency vehicle; therefore, expect to spend money on lights and a siren. LED lights are great, as they do not have the amp draw that the old incandescent or even halogen lights had. For that matter, they draw much less than strobes, too. The trade-off is in the initial cost. You'll have to meet NFPA lighting specs, not merely the State Vehicle Code. Some companies, like Federal Signal, will have NFPA literature that allows you to understand the requirements. By selecting from various choices, Federal will guarantee you meet the standard. Why is this important? First, safety of you and your crew, next is the safety of the public. Of course, those attorney creatures can cause us great grief if we overlook some of these issues.

Have the vehicle gone over mechanically with all fluids changed (anti-freeze, brake fluid, transmission fluid/filter, differential fluid, etc.). Replace all wear items (wipers, shock absorbers, bushings, etc), and do a full tune-up, replace the filters and more. Have the engine and undercarriage steam cleaned. The body may need rust-proofed and undercoated. Interior storage area should be coated by hard plastic materials like "Rhino-lining". Compartments – interior and exterior both, need lights to operate at night. Compartment doors that open out need to have reflectors added. Does the vehicle have a back-up alarm?

Examine the needs of your FD, but remember you don't have to reinvent the wheel. There are plenty of horror stories out there to teach you what not to do, and plenty of success stories to help you on the right path. The end result will be a vehicle that (1) is fully functional, (2) is reliable, and (3) looks professional.

More next month, when we take up the cause of a rich FD.