

Boca police asking city for advanced stun guns

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske
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BOCA RATON — “Would you rather be hit on the head and have stitches left or be incapacitated without injury?”

This is no trick question. Police Chief Andrew Scott is making a case for TASER stun guns, devices designed to knock the sense out of anybody unwilling to go quietly.

Today the Boca Raton City Council will vote on a department request for 85 of the M26 Advanced TASER stun guns billed by their Arizona-based manufacturer as a “less-than-lethal” alternative to deadly force. Price tag: \$60,790.

The new guns, which look like semi-automatic handguns, use a cartridge of compressed nitrogen to shoot a pair of barbs up to 21 feet. The barbs are connected to two insulated metal wires and snag skin or clothing within seconds. They carry a charge of 26 watts (50,000 volts) vs. a mere five or seven watts in previous versions — strong enough to pass through two inches of material, yet with an amperage so low it won't injure people with heart problems or internal devices like pacemakers, according to company spokesman Steve Tuttle.

Florida is TASER's third-largest customer base, behind California and Washington. Deputies in Florida's Orange County carry the M26; so do police officers in Titusville and Cape Coral, Tuttle said.

We're talking the “latest and greatest in TASERs,” Scott said. Worst case scenario, if you were hit by a barb, “you would drop down to the ground. You'd probably go into some semblance of spasms, convulsions,” he said.

But consider the alternative: batons and pepper spray. Messy for you, but also for police, Tuttle said.

“That's the beauty of the sys-

tem — it just puts you down temporarily with no after-effects,” Tuttle said.

Scott said, “Rather than using an impact weapon, we'll be able to subdue a violent subject with minimal harm to him and the officer.”

Tuttle said TASER (which stands for the founder's favorite kid's book, *Tom Swift and his Electric Rifle*) has seen no long-term injuries from the guns since they debuted in December 1999. He said they have never settled a lawsuit or otherwise tapped product liability insurance.

Alleged police abuse of stun guns like TASERs gained national attention during the Rodney King case in 1991, as well as in local cases. In a failed suit against Lake Worth police in 1990, James Dowling alleged an officer repeatedly stunned him at the jail. Two years later, a Martin County man filed a complaint with the sheriff's office there alleging a deputy stunned him while he was unconscious and handcuffed in a hospital bed.

After deputies told prosecutors they saw Martin County sheriff's Lt. Bill Ward shock the drunken-driving suspect, a grand jury charged Ward with four counts of misdemeanor battery. Ward, who was demoted to deputy, was ordered to pay a \$700 fine after he pleaded no contest to two of the counts.

Prosecutors dropped the other two charges, and the judge withheld adjudication in the no-contest plea, meaning they did not go on his record.

Tuttle said the new guns have a computer memory that stores dates and times for the gun's last 585 shots, which can be used as evidence in court.

“It keeps (officers) responsible in the future,” Tuttle said. *Staff writer John Murawski contributed to this story.*

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