

Montgomery County needs better oversight of its vehicles, inspector's report says

By Victor Zapana, Published: December 5

Montgomery County officials should better scrutinize employees' use of county cars, according to a report by the Montgomery inspector general that said that some departments have not been following vehicle policies.

In a report sent to county officials last Wednesday, Inspector General Edward Blansitt wrote that the departments have not kept up-to-date driver's information on their employees, as required by the county. For instance, the Department of Liquor Control has not annually updated driving histories of its employees and therefore may not be able to determine whether any workers had suspended or revoked licenses.

The report, which Blansitt's office initiated when Montgomery legislators started to scrutinize the use of county vehicles last spring, is set to be released to the public next week. The Washington Post obtained a copy Monday, and Blansitt, who in the report urged government officials to ensure county compliance, declined to comment for this story.

Blansitt also suggested in the report that the county could save money by cutting down its fleet of more than 650 cars, sport-utility vehicles, pickups and vans. He found that employees underuse a third of the cars, and that officials are behind in replacing half of them.

Officials are studying the report, and Montgomery County Council members will hold a public meeting on the findings early next year, according to council staff.

In a response attached to the report, Timothy L. Firestine, chief administrative officer for the county, said he agreed with Blansitt's recommendations, adding that the county would improve its record-keeping of employee driving records once he finalizes a strengthened vehicle policy this year.

The inspector's report supplements a months-long county inquiry into how it manages its vehicular fleet. In April, facing pointed questions from the council in a wrenching budget year, county officials acknowledged that lax controls had led to abuses of take-home vehicles. Some employees drove county cars home even after their agencies were ordered to halt the practice, officials said.

Employee use of public safety vehicles also has led to recent controversy. Earlier this year, Montgomery Fire and Emergency Services Chief Richard Bowers tried — and

failed — to restrict vehicle use by volunteer firefighters. Council members are now considering legislation that would remove the volunteers' ability to block Bowers' efforts. Council members are expected to discuss the bill at a public safety committee meeting Thursday.

Blansitt, however, did not address the abuse of take-home or public safety vehicles in his report. Instead, his office identified more than 200 county cars that were underused. The report estimates that the county could sell and not replace about 90 of them, potentially garnering about \$1.4 million upfront and saving about \$70,000 a year in maintenance costs.

Blansitt added that about half of county cars are scheduled to be replaced by the end of the fiscal year, at a cost of about \$5.6 million. Firestone said there are \$11 million in funds to use for vehicle replacement, but Blansitt noted that the money could be used for "more urgent, competing needs," which could include replacing old tow trucks and buses.

County officials seemed receptive to the report's findings. Council member Nancy Navarro (D-Eastern County), chair of one of two council committees expected to discuss the report, is concerned about county compliance, according to a council aide. Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), chair of the other committee, declined to comment on the findings Monday, saying he had not read the report. But he added that he looks forward to discussing the results next year.

Council member Hans Riemer (D-At Large), who has largely spearheaded the county's scrutiny of county vehicles, said he thinks reducing the fleet is an important goal.

"It seems that administrative procedures are not always followed, so that's kind of a broader issue," Riemer said. "You've got to find a solution that can address that problem, too."

Blansitt's office also plans to report on the school system's financial reporting and employee use of government charge cards. County officials expect the reports to be released within the next few months.