



FERGUSON POLICE CAUTIOUSLY CONSIDERING LESS-LETHAL DEVICE FOR PISTOLS



FERGUSON • Police here said Wednesday that they were looking at less lethal weapons but were far from settled on a device that blunts the effect of bullets.

Plans to test the product, marketed as “The Alternative,” were described in a Washington Post story this week that Chief Thomas Jackson said might have overstated the department’s interest.

The city council has not endorsed it, and the department has not yet adopted policies to govern its use, Jackson said.

“The city of Ferguson is in the process of seeking different alternatives for its police department to use less than lethal force in certain instances to fight crime,” Jackson said in a statement. He noted that officials “have not committed” to The Alternative nor set a timetable to decide.

“This is the beginning of a long process that the City Council and the Ferguson police department are committed to exploring,” he added.

Ferguson drew national attention to race and policing when a white officer, Darren Wilson, fatally shot a black teenager, Michael Brown, in a street confrontation Aug. 9. The incident polarized many police officers and their critics.

The department’s top brass soon began researching less-lethal weapons, and The Alternative’s vendor responded by offering to supply training and free units, which usually cost \$42 each, during a trial period, Jackson said.

“We agreed to take a look at it without committing to use it or deploy it,” Jackson said. “We have to make sure the product is capable of doing what it says and that it’s going to be a good fit for Ferguson PD. It’s not a done deal; we’re just looking at it like we would anything else, and it doesn’t cost us anything to look.”

The Alternative attaches to a standard semi-automatic pistol, positioning a brightly colored sphere in front of the muzzle to ride a bullet to its target. That sphere slows the projectile and spreads out its energy, with the intention of knocking down an adversary without penetrating the skin, according to information from the manufacturer, Alternative Ballistics, based in California.

The company could not be reached Wednesday for comment.

The sphere is known in police circles as a “Bozo round” because of its bold color and resemblance to a clown’s nose.

The officer must slip one on the pistol by hand before firing. The next shot is a normal bullet, unless the officer attaches another sphere.

Jackson said the news story “overstated how far along we were,” and he worries it left an impression that “we were going to be going out this afternoon and Bozo-ing people.”

The chief also said he wanted to discuss the product with the St. Louis County prosecutor, U.S. attorney and Justice Department.

“Another big factor in this is our insurance costs,” Jackson said. “We need to determine whether this being a new product will affect our insurance negatively.”

He would not speculate on the kinds of scenarios in which this type of weapon would be appropriate. He did say he worried about adding yet another decision for an officer to make during stressful situations.

Jackson declined to comment on whether it would have made a difference if one were available to Wilson the day he shot Brown.

“That’s not something I want to speculate on,” he said. “This is about moving forward.”