

Oakland Tribune

Donation helps keep police chopper aloft in Oakland

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The Oakland Police Department helicopter Argus is seen during a press conference near the...

The Oakland Police Department's eye in the sky will get off the ground more often this year thanks to a private donation.

Oakland police lauded Fueling California on Wednesday after the nonprofit donated \$10,000 worth of fuel to power Oakland's police helicopters.

"This will certainly go a long way to helping ... the Police Department keep our streets safe," police Chief Howard Jordan said at a news conference at the department's helicopter station near Oakland International Airport.

The City Council gutted the department's annual helicopter budget -- from about \$350,000 to less than \$100,000 -- in a major round of cuts in 2009, police said. With less money, the city's two primary helicopters have been logging a combined 200 hours of flight time per year -- down from about 1,000 hours before the cuts.

The donation from Fueling California, a nonprofit that represents major fuel consumers such as airlines, will pay for 80 hours of flight time. The group's Bruce Mac Rae urged local companies to also contribute so "we can keep this bird in the sky, protecting us."

The department's helicopters have flown about 50 hours during Occupy protests and provide cover during tactical missions, including those undertaken recently with federal law enforcement agencies. The helicopters also help find missing persons and safely direct police when major crimes are in progress. In 2008, the helicopters contributed to several hundred arrests, Lt.

Michael Poirier said.

"I can tell you, without the use of the helicopter, people get away sometimes," he said. "This tool allows our officers on the street to not only do it safely but to get the suspects."

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