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Chicago Police horses will also get riot gear for NATO/G-8 summits

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Last Modified: Feb 21, 2012 12:56PM

Horses in the Chicago Police Department's Mounted Unit assigned to crowd control during the NATO and G-8 summits will be outfitted with "riot gear," just like the officers riding them and those on the ground facing off against protesters.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel's administration is soliciting bids for "police horse riot gear and training aids" in preparation for the May 19-21 summits at McCormick Place expected to shine an international spotlight on Chicago.

The solicitation specifically requests: leather nose guards — 22 inches long and five inches wide — with "impact-absorbing foam"; clear, wrap-around visors to protect the horse's eyes; 17-inch-long rear leg shields and 11-inch-long front leg shields, both made of "high-impact plastic" and soft foam; and "training aids" for horses, including a "crowd control training ball set."

The mounted unit has 30 horses, 30 officers and an annual budget of nearly \$2.7 million.

Police Department spokesperson Melissa Stratton said all 30 horses will be equipped with the new riot gear. She noted that the horses are "great crowd control tools" expected to provide "significant support to officers on the ground" during the summits.

"This is not the first time we've had [riot] gear for the horses. [But] we are updating the equipment. We have had horses attacked in the past. If the horse is injured, it puts both the horse and the officer at risk. This equipment protects both the officer and the horse," she said.

Fraternal Order of Police President Mike Shields agreed that, "The safety of the horses is paramount to the safety of the officers" riding horseback.

He called the Chicago Police Department's Mounted Unit one of the nation's "most disciplined and well-trained," adding, that its "presence in a crowd has a major impact on minimizing escalating tensions in large groups."

An officer assigned to the Mounted Unit, who asked to remain anonymous, noted that some of the 30 horses "may not be street-ready" in time for the NATO and G-8 summits.

"If you look at our manpower, there's enough of us where we could take a city street. If they split us up, we could possibly do two locations, but our effectiveness would be diminished. That's the most they could get out of us: two locations. And these demonstrators could be everywhere," the officer said.

Referring to the protesters, the officer said, “They’re gonna try us. We’re gonna have at least one bad day. And from that day on, the city will determine how they’re gonna handle it because nobody knows how bad it’s gonna get.”

The Chicago Sun-Times reported last week that Chicago Police officers facing off against protesters during the back-to-back summits would be equipped with new face shields that fit comfortably over gas masks and include an air-tight seal to prevent officers from being blinded by liquids thrown at them.

The \$193,461 emergency contract with Colorado-based Super Seer Corp. for the purchase of 3,057 shields marked the first use of the power granted to Emanuel to purchase goods and services for the summits — without City Council approval or competitive bidding — provided those items cannot be purchased under existing contracts.

Shields demanded the new shields to prevent his officers from being blinded by bags of urine and feces thrown at them by “anarchists” and other hard-core protesters. After the emergency purchase, he questioned whether 3,057 shields would be enough if, as he fears, tens of thousands of protesters descend on Chicago.

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