

# SPRINGFIELD PURCHASES POLICE ARMORED SUBURBAN

It's a no-brainer for Springfield Councilor and Lane County Sheriff's deputy Joe Pishioneri that the Springfield Police Department should purchase a police-armored Suburban.

"It's nothing but a rolling [ballistic] vest," Pishioneri said of the armored vehicle during the Feb. 6 Springfield City Council meeting.

The rolling ballistic vest Pishioneri refers to is an armored 2017 Chevrolet Suburban purchased by the city of Springfield after a 5-0 vote in favor, with Councilor Leonard Stoehr abstaining. The Suburban comes with a price tag of \$159,500 and \$4,850 in freight costs.

SPD used federal forfeiture funds to purchase the Suburban. Interim Chief Richard Lewis says the department has used the funds in the past for training and weapons acquisition but there is a limit to how the funds can be used.

Lewis says that the government wants police agencies to use these funds to prioritize drug cases.

Federal forfeiture is money or property seized from citizens, often without court proceedings, and given to the federal government. A percentage is later returned to the law enforcement agency making the seizure. Forfeiture funds often come from alleged drug cases. This is the largest purchase from those funds, Lewis says.

The American Civil Liberties Union calls federal forfeiture flawed, saying, "Owners need not ever be arrested or convicted of a crime for their cash, cars or even real estate to be taken away permanently by the government."

Before buying the vehicle from Missouri-based Armored Group, LLC, SPD had to receive approval from the Department of Justice, a requirement stemming from Executive Order 13688. The order's intention is to avoid police equipment purchases that appear too militaristic.



And that's what the Suburban is, according to Lewis — non-militaristic.

The Armored Group lists the Army, the Department of Defense and foreign governments as among its clients for its armored cars and tactical vehicles.

The vehicle avoids a military appearance like that of a BearCat armored personnel carrier, Lewis says.

"It's an armored Suburban and should be no different than a soccer mom's driving down the road," he says. "You shouldn't notice it as any different than any other vehicle with the exception of emergency lights."

The vehicle won't be on the street daily, Lewis says, but it will still be used on a weekly basis. He hopes it will be in the police department's fleet for 20 to 25 years.

The acquisition of the vehicle won't make the police department anymore aggressive, Lewis assured the council, after Stoehr referenced the Eugene Police Department's use of a BearCat that antagonized Brian Babb — a veteran with PTSD who was shot and killed during a mental health crisis.

Instead, he says, the Suburban will work as a shield for police officers during warranted searches or cases of active shooters. For police officers, it will offer a shield to hide behind instead of having to hide behind a regular police vehicle.

"I'm trying to afford the police the best protection I can," he says. "This particular vehicle has the armor protection to stop rifle rounds."

The 2017 Chevrolet Suburban has, among other features, a gun port in the rear to return fire if there is a trailing threat, Springfield documents show. But this vehicle wouldn't be used in any pursuits, Lewis says, because of the heavy weight of the armor — documents show the vehicle comes in at about 11,000 pounds, almost 6,000 pounds more than a typical Suburban's curb weight. ■

## HAPPENING HISTORY

BY HEATHER KLIEVER

### JOHN DOWNER

In honor of Black History Month, we bring you the story of a recently "rediscovered" black pioneer of Lane County.

About three months ago, historian Steve Williamson wrote to the Lane County Historical Museum asking what we knew of a black miner in the Blue River area.

Williamson knew the surname and that the local Downer Springs were his namesake.

An immigrant from the West Indies, John Downer arrived in the U.S. in 1854, according to the 1900 census. His race was listed as "black" and, in 1900, Downer was literate in both reading and writing English. Also noteworthy, Downer was a property owner of the Treasure Mine in the Blue River mining district of Lane County and held a patent on the Keystone mine fully in his own name.

A Dec. 17, 1889, *Morning Oregonian* article claims that Downer was the first miner to find gold in the Blue River district.

Not much is known of Downer's personal life. It appears he never had a domestic relationship that was noted in census or recorded elsewhere. However, we have found quite a few litigation disputes in local and regional papers. In all but one case, it looks as though Downer was successful in defending his positions. The issues raised in court involved mining

equipment and property.

It appears that Downer held a bit of clout when it came to his political affiliations.

An Aug. 19, 1892, story in the *Eugene Journal* states "the only colored citizen of Lane County is a member of the Grant and Wilson Club. He was formerly a Democrat, and voted for Whiteaker at the last election."

Though Downer is not mentioned by name, the museum attributes this information to him.

John Downer was not extraordinarily wealthy but appeared to have been comfortable. He owned a ranch and cabin and was amicably familiar with other land and mining operation owners in the area. Two investors of neighboring mines were Thomas [T.G.] Hendricks and Stewart B. Eakins, owners of The First National Bank in Eugene. This friendship played an important role in Downer's Eugene burial.

According to obituary information found in the *Morning Register* and the *Eugene Guard*, John Downer fell ill a couple weeks before his death. Neighbors were looking after him while he was recovering in his Blue River cabin. Unfortunately, neighbors went to check on him after a few days only to discover that his cabin had burned down, and Downer barely escaped.

Neighbors took him in and eventually were able to get him, through the county court, into the general hospital in Eugene, where he later died of injuries that occurred during the fire.

In Downer's *Eugene Guard* obituary dated June 3, 1909, T.G. Hendricks is quoted as saying, "Downer was a white man, even though his skin was black."

His *Morning Register* obituary on June 4, 1909, said Downer "was a man of unquestioned honor and integrity, and those who had dealing with him regarded him as the soul of honor."

Personally, I prefer the expanded version that lists his professional and personal attributes.

Hendricks and Eakins purchased a plot for John Downer in the IOOF Cemetery, located near the UO campus on 18th between University Street and the Frohnmayer music building, to keep him from being buried in the potter's field. He is located in Section B, Block 389, Plot 7, in an unmarked grave.

The IOOF has Downer listed as John "Old John" Downer, buried June 2, 1909.

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