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City stands up for Segway patrols

Buys dozens more 'human transporters' for safety agencies

BY FRANK MAIN AND FRAN SPIELMAN
Staff Reporters

When 20-year-old Christopher Sanders was shot to death in June on a downtown street outside Taste of Chicago, a police officer riding a battery-powered Segway Human Transporter was the first on the scene.

"The officer protected the crime scene," Deputy Chief Ralph Chiczewski said. "This allowed him to be in the right place at the right time."

The department likes the two-wheeled electric scooters because they allow officers to navigate crowds like those on the downtown streets where Sanders was killed, Chiczewski said.

Now, under a \$580,000 contract the city approved last month, the number of Segways patrolling downtown Chicago will increase from 26 to 41. O'Hare and Midway airports, where police officers operate 12 Segways, will get five more, police spokeswoman Monique Bond said.

That leaves about 60 other Segways purchased under a contract with Segway Experience of Chicago, the winning bidder over two other firms, Bond said. Those Segways, which cost about \$6,000 each, may be used by other city departments, such as the Fire Department and the Office of Emergency Management and Communications, which oversees traffic control aides, she said.

Blue lights, saddlebags

When they were first introduced in 2001, Segways, which resemble old-fashioned push lawn mowers with big rubber wheels, were touted as a revolution in how urbanites would get around. But a large consumer market never materialized. Instead, police depart-

ments, universities, malls, the military and other organizations have gravitated to the devices for patrols.

The scooters, which are hard to tip over because they're balanced with gyroscopes, can go up to 12.5 mph. Their batteries have been improved so they can last an entire police shift of about eight hours, experts say. The new police scooters will have blue lights and sirens as well as large saddlebags to hold emergency equipment.

Chiczewski, who rides a Segway in the downtown area he supervises, says they allow officers to see over the heads of pedestrians because riders stand about 8 inches above the sidewalk or street.

"For the St. Patrick's Day Parade, I covered 10 times the area I would have covered on foot," he said.

Most of the arrests his officers have made on Segways involve "quality of life" offenses like urinating in public and theft, Chiczewski said, adding that the devices supplement his horse patrols and his bicycle patrols.

Still not much retail demand

In March, officers on Segways in the Central District south of the Chicago River made 22 arrests, most of them for shoplifting, and wrote 530 parking citations, Bond said.

William Johnson, owner of Segway Experience of Chicago LLC, said, "Chicago was the first city in the country to embrace this mode of transportation to the degree they have."

Still, Johnson acknowledged consumers are not clamoring for Segways — yet.

"The product in the retail world has not crossed the chasm," he said. "In my crystal ball, I think a Segway will be a great mode of transit to take you the last 10 percent of the trip where mass transit doesn't go. I think these alternate fuel modes of transportation will get a lot of attention in the next five to 10 years."

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Officer Caldwell Littleton rides a Segway along State Street Tuesday. Police say the battery-powered scooters help them better patrol events such as parades and Taste of Chicago. —JIM FROST/SUN-TIMES

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