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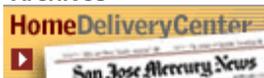
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Bunker security pushed

REP. LANTOS' BILL REQUIRES ALARMS, CAMERAS AT STORAGE SITES

By Renee Koury Mercury News

Hoping to fill a "gaping hole" in homeland security, U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos of San Mateo unveiled legislation Tuesday that would require local police agencies to install security alarms and cameras at their storage bunkers for high explosives -- and to report what they're storing to the federal government.

The bill was prompted by outrage over the theft last summer of 200 pounds of powerful explosives from a law enforcement bunker near Springs Reservoir. The depot, used by the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office, the San Police Department and the FBI, had an alarm that had been out of order for at least a week. A thief broke through fencing and a lock to enter the depot undetected twice during the weekend.

Four suspects have been arrested and the munitions recovered. The thieves were apparently planning to sell the explosives on the black market and use the money allegedly to purchase a car habit, sheriff's officials said, and there was no threat of terrorism. The unguarded bunker was closed down.

Despite the peaceful ending, the theft prompted a furor and a rare hearing in San Mateo County House national security subcommittee chaired by Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn.

Lantos and Shays said they were appalled to learn that the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives had no idea how many police agencies across the nation store explosives or where the depots are located.

On Tuesday, Lantos and Shays introduced the bill requiring security systems and establishing the first federal oversight of explosives stored by police agencies; currently only private

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`` It's absurd to talk about homeland security in the abstract, to move from yellow to red without dealing with a gaping hole in our homeland security system, namely the storage of explosives by public entities," Lantos said Tuesday. He was referring in his statement to the color code to indicate the danger level of a terrorist attack.

The bill would give each state six months to report to the U.S. attorney general the number of explosives stored by local law enforcement agencies. The attorney general would establish deadlines for agencies to outfit the facilities with cameras or alarms and would have to inspect them.

The bill would pay police agencies up to 50 percent of the cost of installing the security systems. It also threatens the agencies with a reduction of 10 percent of their homeland security grants if they fail to comply.

The bill would not affect private companies, which already are required to report the security systems at their storage sites.

Lantos said he has heard no opposition to the bill so far. During the subcommittee hearing last summer, San Francisco Police Chief Heather Fong and San Mateo Sheriff Don Horsley would support such legislation. San Mateo County Undersheriff Greg Munks said Tuesday that matching grants provide an added gleam.

`` We recognize the need to have better security devices, alarms and cameras," he said. "The responsibility we have that goes along with operating a bomb disposal unit. That the government would pay for half of it is encouraging."

The county has received about \$6 million over the past three years in federal homeland security funds, he said, and would not want to risk losing 10 percent of it by failing to comply with the bill.

Since the theft last summer, the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office detonated some of the explosives at sea and moved the rest to a secret location inside a military base that it would not name. The other agencies also moved their explosives to undisclosed locations.

The sheriff's office stores the munitions for use in training bomb-sniffing dogs and to store confiscated explosives that are too unstable to move, Munks said.

The Lantos-Shays legislation is expected to be referred to their national security subcommittee.

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