

Tri-county cocaine undercover task force gains support

By Jeanne Curran
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A plan to establish a six-agent undercover task force to fight cocaine trafficking in Penobscot, Piscataquis and Hancock counties is on the drawing board and could be implemented, with support from the counties and local municipalities, by February, according to Richard Cohen, U.S. Attorney for the State of Maine.

Calling cocaine trafficking "the most insidious problem" in Maine, Cohen said Wednesday that he is "touching base" with local officials to garner support for the project. The task force could cost the counties about \$200,000 for personnel, with support services provided by the state and federal government, he said.

The federal official said that he hopes to have a formal proposal and a budget ready for presentation within the month. Some local officials already have indicated their support for the task force, he said.

During a meeting this week with Penobscot County Commissioners and the county's legislative delegation, Sheriff Edward Reynolds called the formation of the task force and its \$50,000 price tag for the county "the buy of the century."

Seeing a recent increase in the number of cocaine-related crimes, R. Christopher Almy, district attorney for Penobscot and Piscataquis counties, also praised Cohen and his effort earlier this week.

"Fortunately, we have a guy of caliber and energy to take this on," he said.

Hancock District Attorney Michael Povich called the joint prosecution of the drug trade by federal, state, and local officials "a wonderful idea" if the task force "made the cases and prosecuted them."

Hancock County Sheriff William Clarke said, however, that his department would not be involved in the project. "We were invited, but we don't have the manpower or the funds to con-

tribute," he said. Clarke said there may be other agencies in the county that would participate.

Cohen said that cocaine trafficking has begun to replace marijuana trafficking as the chief drug activity in the state. He described it as being "very well organized" with a hierarchy of financiers and managers. Much of the drug is coming into the state from Florida and the Central Falls, R.I., area, he said.

"Clearly, cocaine is the drug of choice," said the federal official. "Virtually no community is immune to it."

While he had no statistics on the amounts coming into the state, Cohen said that his Bangor office recently has handled 40 to 50 cocaine-related cases. He said that cocaine trafficking is "creating other crime problems" and is beginning to result in more property crimes. He also pointed out that 25 percent of all murders in the state are drug-related.

"We really saw violence with marijuana traf-

ficking," he said. "Violence is very much involved with cocaine trafficking."

Saying that the situation was "really reaching serious proportions, Almy said his office also has been handling more cocaine-related crimes.

"More and more cocaine is being imported in this state, and it's being used more and more," said Almy. "It's beginning to affect innocent people."

Cohen said that "no one existing law enforcement agency is dealing with cocaine trafficking. It has to be a multi-faceted approach having a coordinated, unified approach at the state and federal level."

A cocaine task force already has been in operation in Cumberland County since July and is "working very well at the moment," he said. A third task force is currently being proposed for York County.

Cohen said it was "somewhat premature" to discuss his tri-county project, which is "still in

the draft stage." He said, however, he envisioned a "covert group working under cover" composed of six to seven fulltime officers "donated by the municipalities and the counties." No new money would have to be provided, he said.

The federal official said the purpose of the task force would be to target "not only the retailers, but also those higher up the level of hierarchy" for arrest and prosecution. Coordination of the group would be handled through his office in Bangor, in cooperation with the district attorney's office, he said.

Cohen said he also met with Bangor Police Chief Francis Woodhead, who is heading a planning committee of police chiefs from the three counties. That committee is seeking ways to provide the personnel and vehicles "to make this a viable unit," said Woodhead on Wednesday.

"It's coming along," said the police chief. "We think it's going to work."