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Deer sharpshooters aim for safety

By Linda Shepard
C & G Staff Writers

ROCHESTER HILLS — The city's upcoming deer cull will be conducted with safety as the highest concern, officials say.

"Every safety precaution has been considered," said Oakland County Sheriff's Office Capt. Tim Atkins, who will oversee the cull with the use of Sheriff's Office sharpshooters. "Safety is our top priority for the whole program."

The city's deer-car crash rate leads the state, and in November, the Rochester Hills City Council approved deer sharp-shooting by trained members of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff's Office will provide sharpshooters at no cost to the city to cull the deer population during January and February. "It was Rochester Hills' decision to use sharpshooters," Atkins said. "Our position is that it's better to use law enforcement [sharpshooters] than others."

The Rochester Hills deer herd has been estimated at 1,000, said Lance DeVoe, the city's Environmental Education Center coordinator. In 2007, 219 deer-car crashes were reported in the city — up from 196 in 2006, and 11 Michigan motorists died in car-deer crashes in 2007, said Southeast Michigan Council of Governments officials.

The times and locations of the upcoming cull have not been announced, said Rochester Hills Mayor Bryan Barnett. "The dates will not be publicized," Barnett said.

The Rochester Hills City Council authorized up to 200 deer hunting permits for Oakland County Sheriff's Office sharpshooters. "That could be 10 deer; the maximum is 200," Barnett said.

A key component of the plan is donation of the deer meat to local homeless shelters. "The meat will be harvested into a much needed resource," Barnett said.

DeVoe said that, currently, hundreds of deer hit by cars on the road are taken to landfills and area incinerators; they are not utilized as a food source. Deer hit by cars and wounded are shot by deputies, DeVoe said. "That is a lot less controlled [than a cull], and done on the side of the road," he said.

Rumors of sharpshooters conducting the cull from helicopters are not true, DeVoe said. "That was never part of our plan or discussed," he said. "And there will not be people walking through neighborhoods with guns. None of those things will be happening."

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The cull will be conducted in stationary locations in undeveloped areas from elevated positions, DeVoe said. "Conducted about two or three times," he said. "It is hard to say what the success rate will be. This is a new thing."

Michigan Department of Natural Resources guidelines require the collection of biological data on all deer culled, DeVoe said. "The information will be used to gauge the health of the deer," he said. "And the deer will be tested for [evidence of] chronic wasting disease."

Residents for Safe Deer Management, a local group, are in opposition to the use of sharpshooters.

"We are asking the council to reconsider their decision and give the reflectors and other non-lethal alternatives a try before turning our city into a shooting range," said Agnes Domanska of Rochester Hills.

Barnett and DeVoe said the city would probably use a wild animal highway warning reflector system in the future. "I definitely think it will happen," DeVoe said. "I am fully confident we will have a test section or two to gauge their effectiveness."

"I think, ultimately, someday, you will see reflectors," Barnett said.

DeVoe said reflectors and sharpshooters are just two elements of a "multi-faceted plan" to reduce the number of deer-car crashes in Rochester Hills.

"We have brochures, classes, signage, a feeding ban — a long list of objectives," he said. "It takes multiple measures, not just one solution. It's not that simple. Our goal is to reduce car-deer accidents."

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