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Riverside County cannot afford to waste money on sloppy oversight of county cars. The county needs tougher oversight of public vehicles, starting with a reduction in the number of county cars people take home at night. And the county should end the wasteful practice of paying workers' commuting costs.

Riverside County's 5,300-vehicle county fleet costs taxpayers $43.7 million a year. County officials last month released an audit revealing that poor management and lax controls wasted millions of dollars annually. This, after the county in June closed a $130 million budget shortfall by slashing programs and draining $50.6 million from reserves.

County government operations require some public vehicles, but does Riverside County really need one car for every four employees? Evidently not: The audit examined 1,939 of the county's "passenger-type" vehicles, and found that workers did not use 672 enough to break even on cost. Taxpayers have better ways to spend money than on cars employees do not drive.

Taxpayers will be glad to know the county plans to draft new guidelines for vehicle purchases and use, for consideration in October. Clearly, Riverside County needs a better grasp of fleet management to avoid needless public expenses.

And unnecessary cars is hardly the only issue the audit uncovered. The county has 1,055 vehicles that employees take home with them at night -- and the actual total may be even higher, the audit noted.

There are legitimate reasons for some employees to have county vehicles at their disposal 24 hours a day, particularly workers who must respond to emergencies. But many of the workers taking home county cars had no justification for that privilege, nor were there consistent standards governing who got the perk.

One of the biggest abusers was the district attorney's office, which had 187 people rolling home in county cars each night. The audit noted that 26 employees who got the cars did not handle any off-duty emergencies in the preceding year. Another 88 had less than a dozen emergency calls during that time.

The district attorney's office said last week that the 187 take-home cars made operations more efficient, but given the budget condition the office plans to trim that number to three. Apparently, inefficiency saves money, at least at the DA's office.

In fact, unnecessary take-home cars add pointless public expenses. The county pays about $4.7 million a year in commuting costs for those 1,055 cars. And using the vehicles to commute shortens their useful life by 63 percent, requiring earlier replacement, the audit notes.

The Board of Supervisors enacted a new policy last month that tightens controls on who can drive county cars home at night. The county says the new rules will cut the number of overnight cars by 50 percent.

But the policy leaves some crucial gaps. The county executive office will approve all requests for take-home cars -- which it was already supposed to be doing under the old policy. Yet that did not prevent the number of cars going home overnight from expanding needlessly. So what does the executive office plan to do differently now? And the county was not even aware of all the cars that were going home each night. So how does the county plan to ensure that departments follow the new rules? Without strict enforcement, policies mean nothing.

And the county should not be paying for personal use of public vehicles. Surely county taxpayers do not need to spend $4.7 million on employees' daily commutes. Private businesses do not pay people to drive back and forth to work; neither should Riverside County.

What's more, the county's mileage tracking system is unreliable, the audit notes, which enables workers to more easily use county vehicles for personal travel. The county should install GPS tracking devices in vehicles. That step would cost money, but can reap savings, as other public agencies have found. Eastern Municipal Water District, for example, installed the devices in March, and in the first four months alone saved almost enough to cover the cost of the GPS program.

Better oversight of county vehicle use would save Riverside County millions of dollars with no detriment to public services. But county supervisors and administrators might also want to explain why the excessive cost of public vehicles only becomes a concern when the budget is tight. Finding a better financial strategy than managerial carelessness should not have to wait until a budget crisis hits.