



# F e d s   w a n t   r e i m b u r s e m e n t m u s c l e   c a r

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By [Tyler Estep](#), The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The U.S. Department of Justice is demanding reimbursement for the nearly \$70,000 that [Gwinnett County Sheriff Butch Conway](#) spent on the high-powered sports car he drives to and from work.

In a recent letter to Conway, the DOJ characterized the sheriff's purchase of a Dodge Charger Hellcat — a 707-horsepower muscle car that some have called the fastest sedan ever built — as “extravagant.”

The federal government previously approved the purchase, which used asset forfeiture funds, but are now questioning if the Hellcat is being used for its stated purpose.

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Gwinnett officials said this week they'll comply with the reimbursement request, and that they'll be adding “review points” to their acquisition process.

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However, Conway, who has been sheriff since 1996, is standing behind the purchase.

“Sheriff Conway maintains that this vehicle is an appropriate purchase, especially for an agency with a \$92 million budget and the opportunity this vehicle provides in making our roadways safer,” Deputy Shannon Volkodav, a sheriff's office spokeswoman, said in a written statement.

Conway's office purchased the Hellcat — menacing in all black with black wheels and heavily tinted windows — in April. It used \$69,258 that had been previously approved by the DOJ's Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section as part of its “equitable sharing program,” which distributes assets seized during enforcement efforts to state and local agencies hoping to make purchases to support their missions.





The 707-horsepower Dodge Charger Hellcat on which the Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office spent nearly \$70,000 in drug seizure money. (Via Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office) (The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

The sheriff's Hellcat application touted the high-powered vehicle's potential use in Gwinnett's Beat the Heat program, a nonprofit that uses drag races in controlled environments to "educate drivers about the dangers of distracted driving and illegal street racing."

Guidelines prohibit "the use of equitably shared funds for extravagant expenditures," the DOJ's letter, dated July 10, said. "The vehicle in question is a high-performance vehicle not typically purchased as part of a traditional fleet of law enforcement vehicles."

The feds also took issue with part of the request that stated Conway would also use the car for undercover and covert operations.

The sheriff's office defended the claim. It said that, in addition to driving the car to and from work, Conway uses it "when he participates in field operations, covert and otherwise, with our deputies."

William Perry, the executive director of Georgia Ethics Watchdogs, called the sheriff's office's explanations of the car's use "bullfeathers." He said money from seized assets should be "treated the same way as a dollar coming out of a taxpayer's pocket."

"In my eyes," Perry said, "the only way Butch Conway can save face is if he writes a personal check for that vehicle and apologizes to the taxpayers of Gwinnett County."

According to the Department of Justice's letter, the sheriff's office is not eligible to request or receive more asset forfeiture funds until the Hellcat money is reimbursed. A deadline of July 31 was given.

Volkodav said Wednesday that the sheriff's office hadn't yet formally responded to the letter and was exploring its options.

Gwinnett County spokesman Joe Sorenson said the county was "committed to resolving the matter quickly and will be adding review points in our process for equipment purchased with asset forfeiture funds to make sure we comply with guidelines set forth by the Department of Justice."

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