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Grant provides and donations outfit rescue vehicle

*By Karen Madden
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GRAND RAPIDS -- Emergency agencies have a new vehicle to use for rescues, patrols and support.

Through a grant from U.S. Smokeless Tobacco's Operation Ranger Program, the Grand Rapids fire and police departments, along with Higgins Ambulance, received a 2008 6-by-6 Polaris Ranger utility vehicle. Donations from residents and local organizations allowed the three groups to purchase a trailer and outfit the new rapid response vehicle, which they received at the beginning of June.

The new Ranger will make a difference at the large events held in Grand Rapids, such as the State Water Ski Show, Police Officer Robert Wiltse said. The crowds and terrain often make it difficult, if not impossible, to use full-sized vehicles to patrol the area and provide emergency assistance.

"We get a lot of complaints around the lake, especially during winter ice fishing," Wiltse said. "There's four miles of trail there that we can use this for patrolling."

A donation from the estate of Jess Eichhorn made it possible for officials to put a roof and windshield on the vehicle, Fire Chief Scott Bernette said. Other donations enabled officials to modify the back of the Ranger, allowing it to safely carry a seated emergency worker and a stretcher.

During wildfires, firefighters can use the vehicle to carry personnel and needed supplies to the scene, Bernette said. It also should speed up response time to accidents in remote locations that are not accessible by larger rescue vehicles.

Operation Ranger got about 2,000 applications this year and will award about 75 vehicles, said Andrew Lee, manager of corporate communications for U.S. Smokeless Tobacco. The company began the program after Sept. 11, 2001, when officials realized most emergency services are underequipped.

The company awards the Rangers based on need, merit, proposed use and a long list of other criteria. Grand Rapids' application was unique because it was one of only a couple received that involved multiple agencies joining together to request and use the vehicle, Lee said.

"That was unique and incredibly impressive," he said.
