

Tri-County Drug Task Force soon to be fully operational

By Jeanne Curran
Of the NEWS Staff

The Tri-County Drug Task Force, designed to combat the increase in cocaine trafficking in Penobscot, Piscataquis, and Hancock counties, is expected to be fully operational by the end of May, according to the federal official who spearheaded its creation.

U.S. Attorney Richard Cohen said Friday that the base of operations for the task force would be in Penobscot County, but would not say where its headquarters would be. He added, "Obviously, we're not revealing that."

"I'm very pleased with the way things are going," said Cohen, during a telephone interview. "Obviously after a lot of time and effort, we were able to get financial and manpower support."

The task force will be the second one of its kind in the state, with one task force already in operation in Cumberland County. Another task force in York County is "sort of in the same exact position" as the tri-county organization, he said.

"There's no question in my mind that we're on the right track" with the task force concept, said Cohen.

Echoing comments made earlier

this week by R. Christopher Almy, Penobscot County district attorney, the federal official said that the drug arrests made this week in Penobscot County by the Maine State Police, the Orono Police Department, and the Indian Island Police Department were "the genesis to a great part of the task-force work."

Saying that the funding figure for the task force approved by the counties' legislative delegations was an approximate one, Cohen said he expected the budget for the operation to be between \$500,000 and \$600,000, including in-kind contributions and funding.

Seven investigators, at an approximate salary of \$25,000-30,000 each, are in the process of being hired for the task force, he said. Two officers each will be provided by the Penobscot County Sheriff's Department and the Maine State Police, while one officer will be provided from the Bangor Police Department, the Piscataquis County Sheriff's Department, and the Ellsworth Police Department.

Cohen added he was still working with other departments in the county to get more investigators.

Other costs for the task force will include 10 vehicles at a cost of \$90,000, \$33,000 in operating costs, and \$12,000 to \$15,000 in drug-pur-

chase money.

Saying there was "a fair amount of drug cases going on in Bangor," Cohen said there has been "something going on operationally" in the area for the past five or six months with the Sheriff's Department, the Bangor Police Department, and the Maine State Police.

Earlier this week, Almy, with whom Cohen said he had been working closely, said that the police sweep of street dealers implemented Tuesday after the grand jury indictments would help the task force "in leading to dealers and suppliers on a higher level." The district attorney said the task force was expected "to pick up where the state police left off, and we'll see the results of this in the next several months and several years."

Cohen said the task force would go after street dealers, but also "target organized groups in the tri-county area and try to cripple the organization." He said that in his experience, "street dealers are just the beginning." Some have "volunteered information that can lead us up the ladder," he said.

An important part of the task force strategy will be "to identify information" that will "allow us to get the people involved in a more comprehensive fashion."