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BLUE MOUNTAIN EAGLE • GRANT COUNTY, OREGON

Wednesday, February 24, 2010

Aryan Nations plan sparks protests in JD

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Editor

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Paul Mullet

JOHN DAY - Community reaction was immediate and vocal last week as an Aryan Nations leader announced a plan to move the headquarters of their white supremacist movement from northern Idaho to Grant County.

About 80 people picketed last Saturday in downtown John Day to raise awareness of the group's activities, with another 60 taking to the streets on Monday.

Protest organizer Delilah Michael of Prairie City said she couldn't sit quietly when she heard the news that a hate group might come here. She noted that she worries about her mixed-race grandchildren.

"I said immediately, it ain't going to happen here, with my grandkids."

The demonstrations were just part of the reaction to the Aryan Nations plans published Feb. 17 in an online Blue Mountain Eagle article. The news also spurred a torrent of online comments, most laced with frustration, anger and worry. By week's end at least two Facebook pages had popped up to oppose the group's intent to bring its racist agenda to Grant County; together they had more than 1,600 members.

John Day Mayor Bob Quinton was dismayed at the prospect of the group moving to town.

"That's the last kind of thing our reputation needs," he said. "We need to be inclusive and emphasize positive things here."



The Eagle/Angel Carpenter

Protest organizer Delilah Michael of Prairie City said she'd stand alone if

Meanwhile, an Idaho attorney with more than two decades of

needed. However, about 80 people experience dealing with hate groups, said Grant County joined her Feb. 20 to show opposition shouldn't underestimate the ability of such organizations to to the Aryan Nations' plan to move to overpower local values and culture.

Grant County.

Norman Gissel of Coeur d'Alene said said communities need to be vocal and firm in resisting the establishment of such groups.

"You've got a potentially serious problem, and the time to start organizing is right away," he said. "They have a real stake in getting a toehold somewhere."

At the invitation of the Blue Mountain Eagle, Gissel will be in town Friday, along with another Idaho civil rights activist, Tony Stewart, to speak at two community meetings. (See details in this issue.)

The impetus for all the uproar was a visit to John Day last week by Paul R. Mullet, who calls himself the national director of the movement. Mullet and some local and regional members of the group toured the town, looking for a building to buy and transform into a headquarters, barracks and meeting place.

Mullet said last Friday that he had made an offer on one property, but hadn't heard back.

Mullet told the Eagle his goal is to establish a "national compound" with meeting rooms and barracks for members and recruits to use. He wants to hold a "national congress" in Grant County in 2011 - an event that could draw white supremacists from across the United States and even other nations.

Establishing a compound and reviving the national gatherings would fill a gap that the organization has had since legal action bankrupted the group's leader, Richard Butler, and his Aryan Nations compound in northern Idaho in 2000. Butler died in 2004, and his movement seemed to dwindle without him. However, recent news reports indicate that racist hate crimes are on the rise in the Northern Idaho and Spokane, Wash.

The Spokesman-Review reported Feb. 7 that Mullet and another man, Gerald O'Brien, were competing for power in the movement. A New York state faction threw its support to O'Brien, according to an article by senior correspondent Bill Morlin.

Meanwhile, Mullet is thought to have inherited many of Butler's former followers in Idaho.

Mullet declined to say how many members the Aryan Nations claims, but said he recently merged three groups under "the Aryan Nations banner."

On its website, the Aryan Nations teaches that the white race is the only one descended from Adam, and that Jews and non-whites are the natural enemies of white people. The mission is to create a state for the "Aryan race," separate from all non-whites, and a "lawful Congress of our race."

Mullet, who wears a swastika patch on his uniform-style shirt, said the group's goal is to create a homeland for white people.

"That area is the Pacific Northwest," he said. "The blacks have Africa, the Jews have Israel ..."

Mullet said his group's current headquarters is in Athol, Idaho, but other sources said they essentially work out of a post office box there. He confirmed that they don't have a real compound. If they can find the right building in John Day, he said, they will be able to provide barracks and space for training recruits, as well as a place for meetings, gatherings and church services, which they hold on Saturdays.

He said the group was drawn to the remoteness of Grant County, the relatively low cost of property and "the proximity to the mountains" for survival training.

They were particularly interested in two properties, the old junior high building on Bridge Street and the vacant church or opera house building on Dayton Street.

He declined to say where the money for such a deal would come from, but said they would pay cash and it would be "from legal means."

Newell Cleaver, School District 3 superintendent, said the junior high building is no longer being actively marketed because the district is pursuing discussions with the Grant County Library Foundation about a possible sale and development of a library there.

The Aryan Nations contingent apparently thought the other building was up for sale because it still had an old real estate sign on a window, but the owner said this week it was not listed.

Shaun Robertson said the building is not for sale and he is not looking for buyers.

Mullet said late last week that if the group can't find a building in town, they would consider a farm property - as long as it has a building.

As he toured John Day, Mullett was accompanied by two Grant County residents - Jacob Green and Christopher Cowan - and Leif Berlin, who wouldn't say where he is from but was described on the group's website as the Washington state leader.

Green, who said he lives in John Day, was introduced as the Oregon state leader for the Aryan Nations and acknowledged that title last week - but this week he said the both he and Cowan had quit the movement. Cowan was described as a sergeant in the state organization.

However, Green said this week that he and Cowan had resigned and no longer are part of the Aryan Nations.

They were still on board, however, during the interview at the newspaper office as Mullet unveiled his plans.

Mullet denied that Aryan Nations is a hate group, although their website calls Jews "parasites" and other names, features a Nazi tribute on video, and includes a section of crude references and manipulated photographs of black people.

While staying at a local motel, they opened the door to their room to clearly display Nazi-style banners as two employees - a black and a Hispanic - went about their work.

Motel officials said people in two other rooms vacated before their stay was up because of concerns about the white supremacist group.

This week, some restaurants and businesses had posted notices that they reserve the right to refuse service to anyone.

Such reactions seemed in contrast to Mullet's initial statement, when he said the Aryan Nations don't expect any conflict with people in Grant County.

"This is a good fit with the values here," he said.

The group said members would do community service projects like chopping wood for the elderly and patrolling the streets to keep drugs and crime at bay. Members may even want to run for office.

Mullet said the group doesn't tolerate drug use, and its members aren't "skinheads."

He said skinheads are violent thugs who don't realize there are rules that need to be followed. He said his organization has strict rules, including a probation period for new recruits, and a military-style chain of command.

"We're very pro-America, but pro-America with the original Constitution," he said.

He said the group would put up lighted crosses and swastika banners on any property it owns, but as a Christian symbol of "our struggle, and who we are."

He also contended their group would boost the economy by bringing in new businesses and drawing more supporters to visit and live here.

"If the Aryan Nations comes into town, it will produce a lot of income for this town," Mullet said. "Coming here would help the county immensely."

Gissel, the Coeur d'Alene attorney, disagreed.

He said the neo-Nazi movement had a chilling effect on tourism and property values in northern Idaho during its heyday under Butler.

Asked about this group relocating to Grant County, Gissel said, "From an economic standpoint alone, you don't want that to happen in your community."

Gissel also warned Grant County not to expect this Aryan Nations group to make the same mistakes that Butler's group did.

"They've learned a lot about the process, just as we have," he said.

Gissel said it's important for the community to take a strong, immediate stand for civil rights. In Idaho, he said, the Aryan Nations arose from roots in the militia and Posse Comitatus movements.

"They stayed under the radar for a number of years, and then this full-fledged white supremacist group emerged," he said.

One lesson from Idaho, he said, is that it doesn't take a large number of people to subvert the local culture.

Meanwhile, local law enforcement agencies were monitoring the evolving situation in John Day.

John Day Police Chief Rich Tirico said he was proud of the way the community stepped up to show its concern about the Aryan Nations. He also said he understood people's frustration at the sudden appearance of a hate group in its midst, but he urged them also to be careful that their response is lawful.

"We want people to show the same responsibility and good judgment they've always shown," he said.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which has been at the forefront of the opposition to neo-Nazi activities elsewhere, offers tips in a publication called " 10 Ways to Fight Hate." The list starts with "Act: Do something. In the face of hatred, apathy will be interpreted as acceptance - by the perpetrators, the public and, worse, the victims. Decent people must take action; if we don't hate persists."

The publication also urges people to unite, support the victims of hate, research and learn, create alternatives, speak up and look to the future, among other tips.

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