

Conservative activists set tea parties

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By David Johnson of the Tribune

Stites will host two-day event starting Friday, while Lewiston will hold a similar event on Saturday

An organizer of a two-day tea party Friday and Saturday at Stites in Idaho County said it's about time national politicians heed the concerns of people in the most remote regions of the country.

"We're just a bunch of people who are tired of the things that are going on," Robert (Rawhide) Cohee, of Harpster, said of the reasons behind the tea party. "We don't even have a say-so because nobody comes to talk with us. The politicians think it's a waste of time, but the people here have got things to say."

The tea party, Cohee said, will begin Friday in the Stites Park at 10 a.m. and focus on the 9-11 attacks of 2001. Speeches, music, food vendors and other activities are planned and will continue Saturday at 10 a.m. in the park through 7 p.m.

"This is as grassroots as it's going to get," Cohee said of the tea party's origin. "I mean, my wife and I sat here today with spray paint and black magic markers making signs."

Similar tea parties will be conducted across the nation Saturday, including in Lewiston, where organizer Doug Schurman said a number of speakers will be on hand from 2 to 4 p.m. outside city hall. The keynote speaker, Schurman said, will be Paul Venable, chairman of the Constitution Party of Idaho.

Cohee, 56, said most of the speakers at Stites will be local. "We couldn't get any politicians to come. We've made more phone calls than you can shake a stick at trying to get somebody."

The size of the tea party, Cohee said, remains to be seen. But interest continues to grow, he said. He described organizers and attendees as "conservative" with little or no party affiliation. "I'll be honest with you," Cohee said, "I'm not Republican or Democrat." He dismissed the notion the Republican party was involved with the tea party.

"The only Republican I've seen in years that was worth anything is (former Alaska Gov. Sarah) Palin," Cohee said. "She's the first one to have a set of balls as far as I'm concerned."

Cohee said the tea party idea got started about three weeks ago in a local coffee shop where he and several others routinely meet. "I'd been listening to stuff and I just thought it might be better if we spoke our piece out loud."

People in remote Idaho, Cohee said, are geared to living off the land, speaking their mind and keeping government out of their lives. "You might say we're just a full-fledged conservative bunch of people. About everybody we have down here sets and watches Fox (News). And basically, they just want the same thing." Cohee said those supporting the tea party don't want new taxes, a new health plan, or any stimulus money.

"The best way to explain it is that people down here are the true pioneers who still exist. We live off what we have and hard work. To tell us that we're going to give everything we work for away, this is nuts," Cohee said.

Cohee, who with his wife has three grown children, said he has no health insurance. "Hell, no. It's a freedom of choice." He said he fears the government might mandate he have insurance, or pay a penalty.

As for stimulus dollars, Cohee said, "What stimulus? The only stimulus we get around here is to get mad enough to make a couple more hauls of firewood to make a living. There's nobody around here bailing anybody out."

Cohee said he hopes the media will cover the Stites tea party just to show that people in far away places are concerned about the effects of mainstream politics. "When you think the whole world is made up of people who live in Chicago, New York or Washington, D.C., well, it's not. We're all part of it."

Subjects to be discussed at the tea party include free speech, gun rights, abortion, health care, taxes, freedom, liberty, finances, stimulus money, political parties, and jobs, according to a brochure.

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