

Inconsistent about accountability

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S.O.B.'s Story (Spouse of Boss) Dan Hammes

It is difficult to imagine Tensed in bedlam, but it is.

The cop from Coeur d'Alene says so.

Christine Wood charged that rapists and child molesters were roaming free in Benewah County. This lawlessness, she says, has left citizens in "bedlam."

Wow.

That sounds really bad.

Of course, over the last few weeks there has been plenty said and written about the latest spat between the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and Benewah County. Little of it was pertinent to the topic at hand. A lot of it was just plain wrong.

This business about deputization is not a new topic. The tribe and county officials have discussed it for months. It became a significant news story when tribal officials decided that the county was not going to deputize their police officers and opted to put legislation that would mandate tribal cops be deputized.

That's when reporters got interested.

What had been a local conversation suddenly became a statewide issue. It's anybody's guess how this will turn out. Legislators are being heavily lobbied by both sides. But before this gets too much further, let's clarify a few things.

This is not about public safety.

This is not about saving lives

This is not about responding to emergencies.

I know. I know. With the exception of one part of one report that is how this has been portrayed.

The tribe has pushed that argument hard and the media have responded. Tribal spokesmen and police officers claim that unless tribal cops are deputized somebody is going to die because tribal policed cannot respond to emergencies.

Except they can.

Sheriff Bob Kirts has authorized them to do so, back in February 2007, shortly after he ended the deputization agreement he had with the tribe. He did so in a letter to tribal chairman, Chief Allan. The tribe said it had no copy of the letter so in January, before this issue erupted, Sheriff Kirts provided a copy to the tribe. The letter, according to Sheriff Kirts and the executive director of the statewide sheriff's association agrees to give tribal cops the authority to act in the case of emergencies.

Sheriff Kirts has repeated that several times since this brouhaha erupted.

So, despite all the hand-wringing and teeth gnashing about "public safety," this is not about public safety.

This is about deputizing tribal cops.

Sheriff Kirts and other county officials do not like the idea because they believe once tribal cops are deputized, the county has no way to supervise their behavior. Sheriff Kirts says that is the very reason he cancelled the deputization agreement in January, 2007.

Tribal cops continued to cite non-tribal members into tribal court in a violation of civil rights. Furthermore, he said, when he asked them repeatedly to stop the practice, they refused. So he ended the agreement.

Tribal representatives promise it will not happen again. County officials remain unconvinced.

And that's where the matter stood until the tribe drafted legislation mandating deputization. Legislation that spawned newspapers and television reports about lawlessness in Benewah County. Except if tribal officers already have authority to respond in emergencies why is deputization necessary again?

Here is an aside worth noting.

Editors at the Spokesman Review have castigated the knuckle-draggers in Benewah County for not deputizing tribal officers. They say ignorance, obstinance or worse can be the only reason the county refuses.

What makes this interesting is the same newspaper that is critical of Benewah County, has editorialized repeatedly about the lack of accountability in the Spokane Police Department.

Everyone knows the stories about the police in Spokane County that include drunk driving, drunk shooting and the death of a man, armed with a bottle of pop, while in police custody. Some writers at the Spokane newspapers have expressed frustration because the inability of elected officials to correct problems in the department.

The city of Spokane recently hired a police ombudsman. The job was created to provide citizens a voice with which to investigate and rectify abuse by the police.

But, because of problems, including disagreements with the union representing the police, the ombudsman is largely powerless. Editorial writers with the newspaper were quick to point out how absurd that is.

Isn't it interesting that the same editorial page that castigates this county for refusing to grant police authority without accountability, wails about the very same thing in their hometown?

DAN HAMMES is publisher of this newspaper.