

Mayor of Elk River warns of 'undesirables'

Elizabeth Rudd/Lewiston Tribune

Elk River's mayor recently warned residents to make note of any suspicious people after reporting several "Arabs" in town to the sheriff's office.

Mayor Jim Martin told members of the Elk River City Council during its meeting last week that he called the Clearwater County Sheriff's Office to report "some undesirables" after residents expressed concern about "Arab people" in town. Martin noted two incidents, each involving "four Arab people."

"So it was just something that we just wanted to put on record with the sheriff's department, and I wanted to let the people know that if you see any suspicious people, just get the number, and if you can, the make of the car, or whatever," Martin said during the meeting.

The Lewiston Tribune received several calls and emails in the days following the council meeting, questioning the mayor's language and subsequent warning. An audio recording of the council's meeting, held at 9 a.m. July 20, was mailed to the Tribune in response to a public records request filed Wednesday.

"We just wanted to put it on notice (to the sheriff's office) that we had some undesirables up here," Martin said during the meeting.

Clearwater County Sheriff Chris Goetz said his office received and responded to multiple reports from Elk River city officials regarding suspicious people the week of July 13. He said none of the incidents have required legal action or been classified as a serious concern from a law enforcement perspective, but deputies have been made aware of the community's unease.

"(It's) nothing that has caused us great concern," Goetz said.

Martin said Monday he reported the incidents because the people were "strange acting," but denied characterizing them as suspicious because of their ethnicity. He said the visitors came into Elk River and did things residents "don't normally do."

"Why they are suspicious? I can't say just because they're Arab," Martin said Monday. "They're just strange acting."

Elk River isn't "against Arabs," Martin said Monday, but "we don't want what's happening in the rest of the world to happen here." He also said a man taking pictures of the town's commercial district was reported as "strange acting" because "people don't just walk up and down taking pictures."

Martin told councilors the first incident occurred July 14 when "four Arabs came into town" and drove up and down the street in a "new car." The second incident happened the next day when a man parked his van near the post office, and stayed in it with his dog for three to four hours.

The third report was made July 16 at Merrill Park.

"Four more Arab people came in, pooped around a little bit in Elk River, then they went out to RV Merrill Park and built a big fire, and I guess it was a big one," Martin said during the meeting. "They were told to put it out, and they wouldn't do it."

Goetz said his office made contact with two of the individuals reported as "suspicious" and learned they were both students at the University of Idaho. The men were from Iran and Kuwait. He said the man in the van was described to his office as "white."

The sheriff said he didn't specifically remember receiving a call about the large fire Martin described, but was working from home Monday afternoon and didn't have access to his call logs.

Martin told councilors last week he was also called about a month ago for a search and rescue effort involving two vehicles that were lost in the area. He said the first car, which had "two Arabs," was lost on Diamond Mountain. A second car "with three Arabs" ended up near Clarkia after the two vehicles became separated.

"We did what we thought was right," Martin said Monday.

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