

Constitutionalists in Asotin County have resident worried about militias

Oath Keepers canceled emergency survival training in Asotin last weekend

Stacy Thacker/Lewiston Tribune

ASOTIN - An Asotin County resident is concerned about the possibility of a growing militia in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley.

The discussion at Monday's Asotin County commissioners' meeting centered around a group called the Oath Keepers, a self-described nonpartisan association of current and former military, police and first responders, who were supposed to be in the area performing an emergency survival training this past weekend. The training, scheduled for an Asotin park, was canceled.

The Oath Keepers stand for the U.S. Constitution and not politicians, according to the group's website. They are about upholding constitutional rights and "will not obey unconstitutional orders," such as disarming the American people or detaining Americans as "enemy combatants." The Oath Keepers believe in a jury trial, which they call an ancient right, and are against warrantless searches.

During Monday's meeting, community member Jill Eckberg said she's worried about the group having permission to come in and hold training exercises.

"The leader of this group is listed as an extremist," she said, adding her belief the group could cause trouble in the county. "Yet the sheriff is letting them come here."

Eckberg called out Asotin County Sheriff John Hilderbrand for being a constitutional sheriff and associating with the Oath Keepers.

"Quite frankly John, I don't trust you because of this," Eckberg said.

Hilderbrand corrected Eckberg and said he isn't associated with the Oath Keepers anymore.

"I have stepped back away from that," he said.

Hilderbrand did own up to being a constitutional sheriff during Monday's meeting, but he said that isn't the same thing as being an Oath Keeper.

"There is a difference between constitutional and constitutionalist," Hilderbrand said.

Constitutionalists have an agenda and use the Constitution in ways that benefit them by twisting the law so it fits their need, he said.

Hilderbrand said he instead considers himself constitutional, and upholds the laws in the Constitution in the way they are originally written and meant to be used.

"I'm glad he dropped his Oath Keeper membership," Eckberg said.

Even though the Oath Keepers' training was canceled, Eckberg said it doesn't change the fact that militias are around.

In terms of a militia, Hilderbrand said he's only heard about the 3 Percent of Idaho.

The Boise-based group is made up of volunteers who stand for freedom, liberty and the Constitution, according to the group's website. They call themselves "America's insurance policy."

Hilderbrand said he's seen the group's logo on a few cars in the valley.

"They're running around town here," Hilderbrand said in a phone interview. "We haven't seen anything to worry about yet."

Members of the 3 Percent group stood outside the Lewiston armed forces recruitment center last year after a gunman in Tennessee shot at military facilities, killing four and wounding three. The 3 Percent members said they stood outside to protect recruiters.

"I have never had any problem, per se, with them," he said.

As far as the Oath Keepers go, Hilderbrand said some people view that group as being more on the radical side. But Hilderbrand said he will not impede on any group's right to free speech.

"I swore to uphold the Constitution and that's what I'm going to do," he said.

Eckberg asked Commissioner Brian Shinn why the Oath Keepers were allowed to hold their training in Asotin.

Shinn said it wasn't the commission's place to keep them out.

"We in no way will restrict this group from gathering in the city of Asotin," he said.

If the city doesn't want the group there, Shinn said it is up to the city to do something. But the group, like everybody else, has a right to the First Amendment and free speech, he said.

"We cannot and should not restrict a group," Shinn said, even if they don't agree with its message.

In other county business Monday:

- A town hall meeting is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Asotin County Courthouse Annex, 95 Second St., Asotin.
- An ordinance declaring an emergency and suspending the use of fires and open burning was approved, with the exception of approved propane fire rings, propane and chemical barbecues. The burn ban is usually in place until October, but Shinn said it depends on the climate and the fire danger.
- Mike Poulson, agricultural and natural resources policy director with Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers' office, attended the meeting and got support from the commissioners to hold a public hearing on a proposal to charge a river user fee in Hells Canyon. The \$5 or \$10 fee is being proposed by the U.S. Forest Service and has been met with some debate. No date has been set.
- Signs related to a new beach ordinance aimed to limit problems on Snake River beaches will go up this week, Public Works Director Dustin Johnson said. There are seven signs at five locations, starting in the Asotin city limits and continuing to Buffalo Eddy, with five beaches in between.

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