

Council salute to Muslim group draws protest

Jim Camden & Kip Hill/SR

The Spokane City Council stepped squarely into the middle of a national debate over Muslims in America, approving a salutation to local Muslims that recognizes their contributions to the community.

A proposal that seemed a simple idea a few weeks ago generated a protest from some of Spokane's tea party faithful, who gathered outside the council's town hall meeting at the Northeast Community Center for what they called "a rally for Spokane values."

State Rep. Matt Shea said the rally was not meant to be anti-Muslim. But he tied the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which has a local chapter, to militant groups and the imposition of Islamic law.

"Shariah law is not compatible with the U.S. Constitution," Shea said to cheers from a crowd of about 70, some of whom waved American flags and held signs denouncing the Council on American-Islamic Relations, or CAIR. Others openly carried guns, as at least four Spokane police officers looked on.

Shea added that the council's recognition should go instead to military veterans.

Admir Rasic, a Bosnian national who accepted the city's salutation on behalf of the local Muslim community, said he simply sought togetherness.

"I think what's important is to celebrate our shared American values," Rasic said.

Any allegations that local Muslims have acted against the interests of the community are "simply false and untrue," he said.

"We're trying to focus the conversation not on who we're not, but who we are," Rasic said. "Teachers, students, members of the military."

Many who attended the rally packed into the community center, where Council President Ben Stuckart gavelled the meeting to order, read the salutation and moved on to legislative business. Many in the audience had left by the time the council got around to hearing public comments about two hours later.

Earlier in the day, Stuckart said, "I was not aware that a salutation for a human rights group would be this interesting."

He said he came up with the idea for a salutation – essentially the council’s notice of appreciation – after meeting with about 20 members of the local Muslim community at a session arranged by CAIR. They included a wide range of occupations, including someone who worked for his late father at the Spokane Neighborhood Action Program for 15 years.

Some said they are fearful of the rhetoric they hear or read about Muslims, Stuckart said. In July, someone painted “Death to Islam” on a Muslim prayer center in the East Central neighborhood.

“I believe it’s up to the leaders in the community to stand up and speak out, to celebrate diversity in our community,” he said.

But between that August meeting and Monday night’s council session, the level of rhetoric ramped up nationwide.

A Muslim teenager in Texas was taken away from his high school in handcuffs after he brought an electronic clock he’d made to show one of his teachers. Some school officials accused him of making a bomb and said he was uncooperative when he insisted it was just a clock. Eventually he was released and no charges were filed, but the story lit up social media.

On Thursday, a man attending a town hall meeting with Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump said the country has a problem with Muslims, that President Barack Obama is one, and “they have training camps growing where they want to kill us. . . . When can we get rid of them?”

Trump, who once questioned whether Obama was born in the U.S., quickly was criticized by his rivals for not correcting the claim the president is a Muslim.

On Sunday, Dr. Ben Carson, who is running second or third in most polls of the GOP presidential field, said on “Meet the Press” that he thinks Islam is not consistent with the Constitution.

Comments like that are hurtful but not surprising to Mona Ali, a Muslim who recently graduated from Gonzaga University and is seeking work as a substitute teacher in the Spokane area. Ali grew up in Post Falls, where she said people frequently treated her as a foreigner, even though she was born in the U.S.

“I’m always having to prove I’m a part of this country,” she said. Saying a Muslim can’t be president is like saying any other American can’t be president, she added.