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TOP STORY

'Fabricated' gun threats cause turmoil in Gearhart

City to tighten city hall security amid social media reports

By R.J. MARX Seaside Signal
Jun 30, 2022



Gearhart City Hall

R.J. Marx

A “fabricated” gun threat has led to city precautions, Chief Jeff Bowman said Wednesday, including a Zoom-only City Council meeting ahead.

Conversations from four Facebook private groups administered by local residents led to reports of potential gun use at an upcoming City Council meeting.

The reports of threats were unfounded, Sheriff Matt Phillips said in an incident report. The sheriff's office determined that the discussion had been distorted via word-of-mouth and social media.

The reports came in the aftermath of the city's contentious May fire bond vote. Social media, including participation of residents and members of the private Facebook pages, raised vigorous opposition to the proposal.

After the vote, at the June 1 council meeting residents threatened a recall vote of mayor and council members.

Cockrum resigned as mayor the next day, citing personal reasons.

On Friday, June 3, an anonymous statement made to acting Mayor Kerry Smith alarmed him enough to tell Sweet he was concerned about people carrying weapons to public meetings.

"In regard to the risk of violence, I was sent a screenshot of two handguns, a bottle of Scotch, and a Bible with a caption that made me ill because of its content," Smith said. "I considered it hate-mongering in tone, and because it came from a person who frequents social media

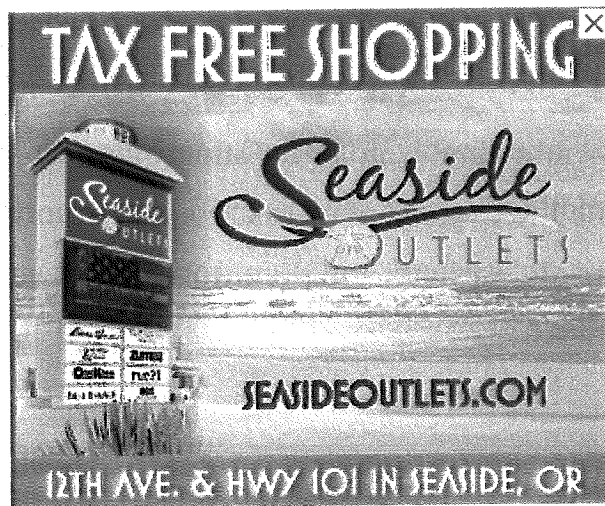
with 10 likes I felt it showed a real lack of responsibility in the individual, which in turn, made me think safety and security needed beefing up at city hall. Threats to people in our community will elicit a timely response by the city.”

Smith asked for better security doors and a metal detector to prevent weapons from entering city hall.

City Administrator Chad Sweet sent an email to city councilors and Smith asking to get all sources of the threats or perceived threats from the councilors, in the form of emails, texts or screenshots.

This message was transmitted by word-of-mouth to a member of the Pacific Way Group, who posted the potential for violence at the next council meeting.

On June 8, group member Beth Cameron, an opponent of the fire bond, reported social media posts to the sheriff’s office after reading on Facebook that Sweet “was saying there would be guns at the next City Council meeting,” Phillips said in his incident report.



Cameron told Phillips she was concerned that Sweet was “unstable,” highlighting past troubles related to alcohol.

Two days later, an administrator of the The Pacific Way Group and other sites, Jack Zimmerman, also contacted Phillips and related to him “the same fabricated statements from his/their social media sites,” Bowman said in a June 15 letter to Smith and councilors.

The posts were used as a basis for allegations against Sweet as “so-called evidence.”

The sheriff’s office determined that the discussion had been distorted via word-of-mouth and social media. Instead of the city manager being proactive in ensuring security at meetings, messaging led to a perception Sweet was either going to bring a firearm to a meeting or invite others to bring them, Phillips said in his June 13 incident report.

“Sweet was aware of the misinformation being spread and we discussed the email he sent,” Phillips said. “Mr. Sweet has no inclination whatsoever to bring firearms of any type to a meeting.”

There was no credible factual information in the claims, Bowman said. “What they called facts weren’t facts at all.”

Bowman said he believes Zimmerman and Cameron initiated their incident reports to the sheriff in an attempt to “red flag” the city administrator under Oregon’s red flag law.

Zimmerman, who co-administers the Pacific Way Group and other sites, said his report to the sheriff’s office wasn’t motivated by politics.

“The question on my part — and I know on Beth Cameron’s part — was if there were in fact, people coming to City Council with guns, why was this not reported? One, to the county sheriff; two, to the residents of Gearhart; and then three, what were the actions that would be taken to protect the residents?”

Zimmerman said reports of alleged threats originated from the councilors themselves, not from members of the private Facebook groups.

Zimmerman said threats were never issued by members of his social media pages or private groups.

“We’ve got people that are operating large organizations, attorneys, business owners,” Zimmerman said. “We’ve got all kinds of very competent, well-balanced people that would never dream of bringing a gun to a city council meeting. How pathetic. They obviously don’t know the character of these participants. None of those members have ever discussed on social media carrying guns, nor have they ever in private meetings or in my presence discussed carrying guns. It’s just dysfunctional. They have not done themselves any good as far as their reputation goes.”

For the moment, the matter is closed, Bowman said. He won’t be contacting Facebook or other social media sites.

But with recent events and the publishing of heightened threats from the Department of Homeland Security, the police chief said that the city should err on the side of caution.

Along with a Zoom meeting next week, the council could consider additional measures regulating firearms on city property.

“Due to possible negative reactions by others from these social media posts and the members themselves, certain precautions should be taken,” Bowman said. “Everyone should be able to feel a sense of safety at a public meeting or gatherings. By making a few adjustments and setting forth some security protocols, citizens will have just that.”

Bowman's statement

‘It’s one thing to lie, distort and fabricate information on social media — disguised as freedom of speech — but to make an official law enforcement complaint against persons who oppose their cause is just plain wrong.’

— Police Chief Jeff Bowman

Re: I'd like to speak at the council meeting

1 message

Chad Sweet <chadsweet@cityofgearhart.com>
To: Bebe Michel <littlebylittle4change@gmail.com>
Cc: Krysti Ficker <krysti@cityofgearhart.com>, Kerry Smith <councilorsmith@cityofgearhart.com>

Wed, Jul 6, 2022 at 8:44 AM

Thanks Bebe,
Message/request received

On Tue, Jul 5, 2022 at 10:57 PM Bebe Michel <littlebylittle4change@gmail.com> wrote:

Hello Chad-

I'd like to speak during the visitor section of the meeting Wed 7/6.

I'd also like to submit the following correspondence:

I'd like to thank Mayor Smith, former Mayor Cockrum, Councilor Fackerell, Councilor Warren, Councilor Tomlinson and City Administrator Chad Sweet for their hard work on behalf of the citizens of Gearhart. I truly appreciate their time and dedication to make Gearhart the best it can be.

I was appalled at the verbal browbeating directed at Mayor Cockrum and the Council by Jack Zimmerman, Beth Cameron and Bob Morey at the last city council meeting. Instead of extending an invitation to come together as we move forward, these people took the opportunity to berate and belittle our elected representatives and then threaten them with a recall. No grace in victory there. These people do not represent me or many others in our community.

In light of alarming social media posts, I also want to thank the city for being proactive regarding the potential for violence at public meetings. I strongly support prohibiting firearms and weapons at public meetings. Threats and intimidation have no place in our civic discourse.

I also would ask that the city continue their work to secure the Highland land parcel on behalf of the city. The fire station bond may have failed this time, but the urgent need to update our fire station remains. We need high ground options to secure a safer future.

Again, I would like to thank you for your public service in these difficult times.

Bebe Michel
661 10th St

Thank you,
Bebe

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"Resilient Together!"

Chad Sweet | City Administrator
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