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County sends man a warning letter

by JOHN CRAMER - Ravalli Republic | Posted: Thursday, February 19, 2009 12:00 am

The Ravalli County Commission on Tuesday sent a warning letter to a Hamilton man they say has harassed county employees.

Commissioners said the time had come to warn Michael Spreadbury that he faces possible arrest for disorderly conduct and threatening a public servant if he doesn't act in a civil manner.

Spreadbury, who is seeking to recall Sheriff Chris Hoffman, County Attorney George Corn and Montana Attorney General Steve Bullock, has accused county and city government of corruption since his conviction for misdemeanor assault over a neighborhood dispute in 2006. A judge later threw out the conviction, saying he hadn't received a timely trial.

The commission voted unanimously to send Spreadbury the warning letter after what they described as his disruptive behavior in the past two weeks, especially an incident that occurred Friday.

County employees said Spreadbury stood outside the county administration building, put a paper bag over his head with the eyes cut out, held an American flag upside down - which is a sign of distress - and took photographs of himself next to the building's sign.

A Hamilton police officer responded, but Spreadbury wasn't arrested.

"It's strange, but it's not a crime," Police Chief Ryan Oster said.

Spreadbury said Wednesday he hadn't received the county's warning letter, which was sent via certified mail Tuesday.

He denied acting inappropriately toward county employees and said he intends to return the letter, unopened, to the county in person.

Spreadbury said the letter was further evidence of the county-run "criminal enterprise" that has violated his and other people's civil rights. He said the Ravalli Republic is part of the criminal scheme to harass him.

The Republic apologized to the county last year for "deceptive ads" that Spreadbury placed in the newspaper in which he said Ravalli County was seeking candidates for sheriff and county attorney.

Spreadbury said he is considering suing the county, city and newspaper and that he has alerted the Federal Bureau of Investigation about their alleged criminal wrongdoings.

The FBI is "very interested," he said. "I'm not s—ting you."

Spreadbury said he was a self-employed geologist and a former U.S. Department of Homeland Security officer who has "fallen from grace" since his "false" arrest and conviction on the assault charge.

"You're dead in the water," he said, describing what he said was the criminal enterprise's efforts. "You need to stay away from we the people. You guys are toast. You have no idea what's coming. That's not a threat either. This place is going to get squashed when the FBI comes to town."

An FBI official could not be reached to comment on Spreadbury's allegations.

"I've done nothing inappropriate" toward county employees, Spreadbury said, adding that people in the former Soviet Union had more freedom under communist rule than do residents of Ravalli County.

Authorities said Spreadbury hasn't threatened anyone, but that county staffers have become increasingly concerned about his behavior and their safety.

"It's disconcerting to me, but I worry more about my staff," said Clerk and Recorder Regina Plettenberg. "They're used to dealing with difficult people, but this gentleman crosses the line."

Plettenberg said Spreadbury has been "very frustrated" in his failed efforts to have recall petitions approved for Hoffman and Corn, but that his behavior wasn't intimidating until recently.

Hoffman said Spreadbury could have been arrested twice for disorderly conduct for his behavior toward county employees in recent weeks.

"He may have already violated state law and it's fair to warn him that he has to be held accountable for his actions," Hoffman said.

The commission's letter to Spreadbury cites his behavior toward clerk and recorder employees on Feb. 5 and Feb. 13. Commissioners said he also acted inappropriately to county environmental health employees in the past.

"While we encourage all Ravalli County citizens to conduct business at our county offices, please be aware that public employees have a right to perform their duties without being yelled at, harassed or intimidated," the county's letter said. "Inappropriate, abusive behavior toward employees will not be tolerated."

Spreadbury's concerns with local government apparently started in 2006 when he became involved in a dispute with a neighbor over a pile of pallets on or near their adjoining property line.

Spreadbury called the sheriff and submitted a neighborhood petition to the county when the neighbor burned the pallets and the smoke drifted into his house, according to court records and county employees.

Spreadbury was cited Oct. 10, 2006, for allegedly assaulting the neighbor. He pled not guilty in Ravalli County Justice Court, but a jury convicted him in August 2007 and he was sentenced to six months in jail with five months suspended and \$514 in court costs and fees, according to court records.

Spreadbury appealed the conviction on the grounds that he didn't receive a timely trial. State law requires a trial within six months of a plea to a misdemeanor charge unless the state shows good cause for a delay.

The county attorney's office argued that Spreadbury had failed to attend an omnibus hearing after his arrest, which caused the trial to be delayed.

District Court Judge Jeffrey Langton dismissed the conviction, saying prosecutors didn't sufficiently explain why the trial was delayed.

Since then, Spreadbury has complained about Hoffman and Corn, saying he was wrongly arrested and prosecuted for protecting his property from "attack" by toxic chemicals and smoke from the burning pallets.

Spreadbury has tried for nearly two years to file recall petitions for Hoffman and Corn and more recently for Bullock.

The proposed petitions have been rejected by the state attorney general's office and the Lewis and Clark and Flathead county attorney's offices for failing to specify acts that were legally sufficient to constitute grounds for a recall.

This week, Spreadbury posted unapproved recall petitions for Hoffman and Corn in the Ravalli County Courthouse, accusing them of incompetence and violating their oaths of office.

In the petitions, Spreadbury said Corn has committed state and federal constitutional crimes and failed to protect citizens.

He said Hoffman has violated citizens' rights to free speech by having his deputies turn off their videotaping cameras during traffic stops and law enforcement operations.

Corn and Hoffman declined to comment on the unapproved recall petitions.

Commission Chairwoman Carlotta Grandstaff said the county was obligated to ensure a safe workplace for its employees.

Commissioners sent copies of the warning letter to all county department heads, who were advised to call 911 if Spreadbury harasses their workers.

Commissioners and Hoffman said citizens have the right to speak their minds, but not to belittle public servants.

The warning letter isn't "a threat," Hoffman said. "It's educating him on the statutes. We're not trying to stifle his free speech rights."

Oster said Spreadbury's behavior has made city staffers "uneasy," but that he hasn't been belligerent.

The sheriff said Montana's federal legislators and Gov. Brian Schweitzer may have had similar problems with Spreadbury.

The governor's spokeswoman said Spreadbury has contacted his office about alleged corruption in Ravalli County, but she declined further comment.

Officials for Sen. Max Baucus, Sen. Jon Tester and Rep. Denny Rehberg said their communications with constituents are confidential.

Disorderly conduct is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000 and a year in the county jail.

Threatening a public servant is a felony that carries a maximum penalty of a \$50,000 fine and 10 years imprisonment.

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Reporter John Cramer can be reached at 363-3300 or jcramer@ravallirepublic.com.