

# Venue of Sheriff's presentation stirred controversy

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

The topic of Sheriff Shane Nelson's Tuesday, January 18 presentation at Aspen Lakes near Sisters — the effects and consequences of Oregon's Ballot Measure 110 — wasn't particularly controversial. The venue and the audience were.

Nelson was asked to make a presentation at the regular meeting of People's Rights Oregon 5 (PR OR5). He chose the topic. The event was portrayed in local media as a "closed-door meeting" because PR OR5 organizers planned to prohibit media attendance. OPB's reporting characterized the organization as an "extremist group," and Central Oregon Daily reported that "multiple extremist watchdog groups consider it 'a racist and far-right organization' that promotes paramilitary activity and, in Oregon, backs plans to secede from the state."

BJ Soper, PR OR5 leader, pushed back hard against the Central Oregon Daily report in an email that the news outlet published in full with an update of their online story:

"These so called 'watch dog groups' that your journalist quoted, I wonder if the editor finds them a balanced resource. Would you find groups like Antifa and BLM on their radar too? Much like your journalist, these groups also fail to reach out and engage with groups like People's Rights, to try to communicate and make an actual fact-based assessment of the people and ideologies. Instead, they simply stalk social media accounts in hopes of finding little tidbits of information that help to drive their ideological assessment of people that do not live the way they do.

"Your quote from the SPLC (Southern Poverty Law Center) regarding ['armed to fend off the tyrannical government,' is completely misleading and horrendously slanted. You will not find a similar statement made anywhere from *this* group you are painting that narrative upon..."

*The Nugget* queried the Deschutes County Sheriff's

Office regarding the "closed" status of the January 18 meeting, and requested an interview with Sheriff Nelson to include questions regarding DCSO protocol related to transparency. The Sheriff's Office then invited *The Nugget* to attend and report on the presentation, to which PR OR5 organizers agreed.

In an interview with *The Nugget* on Friday, January 21, Nelson explained how he looks at events such as the January 18 presentation.

"I look at it really simply like this," he said. "I have a lot of constituents with a wide range of beliefs."

He noted that there is a subtle but important difference between a "meeting" with a group and a "presentation" before a group. A meeting implies a dialogue over the views, issues, and concerns of a group, while a presentation focuses on a specific issue of policy or law that affects the DCSO and the Central Oregon community — such as the effects of Measure 110.

"There are certain times I will not sit down and meet with a group," he said, though he emphasized that such a decision is rare.

He said he once turned down a meeting with a group associated with the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

"I understand the pain and damage the Malheur Refuge takeover caused," he said. "I enforce the law and I absolutely disagree with breaking the law to protest or make your voice heard."

He said he also turned down a meeting with Central Oregon Peacekeepers. The group proclaims on its Facebook page that: "The Peacekeepers are dedicated to the safety of the Central Oregon activist community. We organize safety volunteers, identify violent counter-protesters, and research public figures. If you believe in justice, equity, and inclusion, we're here for you."

The sheriff said he turned down the meeting because of a perceived anti-law-enforcement message, saying that he saw a picture on the group's website that depicted a law

enforcement officer being assaulted (in a positive light).

Nelson said that refusing a meeting does not mean he will not take input. He said he receives emails and phone calls from a range of individuals "all the time."

"It's not like I just shut down channels," he said. "I just try to do things that I think will be productive."

Regarding media attendance at presentations, he said that he often speaks to groups from Rotary Clubs to homeowners associations where no media is present. Pressed on whether or not those groups specifically prohibit media presence, he said that the best way he can describe it is, "I speak to a lot of groups where it appears that just their membership is present."

He acknowledged that some groups and settings are more high-profile, controversial, or sensitive than others. He said that there is no specific policy around transparency, but that when there is a high degree of public interest he will have the proceedings recorded and posted on DCSO social media and invite a media representative to attend, as he did in the case of the January 18 meeting.

Nelson entertained a lengthy Q&A session after his presentation on the effects of the law decriminalizing user amounts of drugs, asking that questions stay on that topic. With a few exceptions, they did. The exceptions offered some insight into the social/political concerns of the group.

One questioner asked how the Sheriff's Office would respond if a vaccine mandate was promulgated that required the Sheriff's Office to act.

Nelson replied: "Our stance hasn't changed. We're always focused on education and voluntary compliance. I have no plans to change our stance. I think our stance is working."

Another question referred to changes in statutory language regarding law enforcement breaking up unlawful assemblies. The language changed from "shall" to "may."

Nelson told the questioner that he supports the change because saying that law enforcement "may" disperse an unlawful assembly instead of insisting that they "shall" allows for discretion in circumstances that could pose a serious threat to officer safety.

In a later interview, Nelson noted that the change also allows discretion to move an assemblage along without treating it as a crime.

"Sometimes you can just disperse the crowd without a crime being committed," he said.

Another questioner asked whether it is true that only a sheriff can remove a governor from office.

"I can't remove anyone from office," Nelson replied. "I don't have that authority under the law."

*The Nugget* spoke to PR OR 5 members at the meeting and after who expressed dismay at the way they were portrayed in reports leading up to the sheriff's presentation.

Darlene McGrady, a retired music teacher, told *The Nugget* that she and her friends in the

group are "conservative, religious, and patriotic."

"We're not crazy and we're not far right-wing," she said. "I don't think so."

She said that the members get together to pray and to help each other and provide mutual support, and that she enjoys being with "like-minded people."

"Why does that make us 'fringe'?" she said. "There's nothing fringe about us."

She said that media and others in the community don't reach out to find out more about the group before passing judgment.

"They don't even know who we are, but they hate us," she said.

BJ Soper agreed to sit down for an interview with *The Nugget* in the coming weeks. View the PR OR5 website at [www.peoplesrightoregon5.com](http://www.peoplesrightoregon5.com).

*Editor's note: Next week's Nugget will include more from our interview with Sheriff Nelson, including his outlook on the City of Sisters contract with DCSO and the status of the jail.*



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