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PERSPECTIVES

Finding someone to police the police

A citizen review board to monitor police action would be a good idea

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

“We’re watching you.” An ominous phrase, to be sure. Depending on who utters it, however, the effect can range from inspirational to infuriating.

For example, when the words are spoken by government leaders or corporate executives, taxpayers and employees often feel uncomfortable at best.

But who scurries for cover when those same words are spoken by the average citizen? One possible answer: police.

Across the country, an increasing number of efforts are underway to monitor the actions of police officers, even as claims of police brutality rise. In New York, for example, Harper’s reports that there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of reports of brutality. This has, to some extent, been accompanied by increasing community mobilization against acts of overt violence by cops.

Eugene has its own share of complaints and watchers. Members of the community have lamented what they saw as excessive force used by the police against people protesting tree cutting on June 1 and against Critical Mass activists.

Conversely, CopWatch, a police monitoring group, and individual members of the community have been increasingly active in watching for police brutality and presenting evidence of excessive behavior to the media.

This is admirable, but the work of a few citizens has clearly not been sufficient to restore balance between the community and the people hired to police it. Ongoing complaints about the June 1 “incident” and the investigation that followed clearly demonstrate this problem.

One body that emerged from the protest was a Citizen Review Board that looked into the allega-

tions. While there were clearly difficulties with this process, the basic concept of having an independent board to investigate allegations of improper police behavior is a good one and has been suggested by several people.

We strongly endorse such an idea, provided that certain powers are granted to the board and certain restrictions are placed upon its makeup.

One of the fundamental concerns that emerged from the June 1 investigation was that the board was forced to rely heavily upon investigations by local and state police. In addition, Eugene police proved unwilling to speak to investigators about the incident, insisting the department should be allowed to police its own.

Clearly, there is something wrong with this attitude. The vast majority of police will never commit a crime, but this should only make them more enthusiastic about creating and empowering a group to independently investigate the department. After all, the innocent ought to have nothing to fear. (At least, isn’t that what police always tell citizens?)

In those cases where questionable actions have occurred, the situation should be investigated by outside parties, not by representatives of a department that has a personal stake in protecting its officers and their ability to act forcefully.

Therefore, we think it is important not only to create a permanent review board, but to give it the power to independently investigate charges brought before it. This would include requiring police to cooperate with the group.

Additionally, to avoid creating a group that would be prone to

justifying police actions “for the good of the community,” we also think the board should not include representatives of the police department or city government. By setting the laws and reporting on the facts, these groups will have their stance well represented anyway.

Instead, we hope the board would consist of community members who are interested in carefully watching for inappropriate police behavior. This could include both members of activist groups and average citizens who are interested in police behavior.

Given that the final decision on action will inevitably lie with the district attorney or the police chief, there is nothing unfair about creating a board that sees its role as being primarily adversarial. Ideally, the review board will wake up every day, walk past police headquarters and proclaim, “We’re watching you.”

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Questions for police

I am a bit concerned about the article concerning the retirements of two Eugene police officers (ODE, Feb. 19). What concerns me is that your reporter effectively gave the officers a platform from which to give their perspective on policing issues, especially the unfortunate events of June 1, without challenging or questioning them on any of the details.

Let me say that I was not personally involved in the protest on June 1. I was not there, nor am I attempting to justify everything that the citizens present at the protest did. But it upsets me to see Sgt. Poppe quoted as saying “there is a price to pay for civil disobedience,” as if that alone justifies the actions of the police in this case. I agree, in general terms, with the statement he made, but I do not think the price society exacts for trespassing on private property should include being struck repeatedly with clubs and having one’s genitals and face sprayed with pepper spray. These actions were taken by police against several protesters who were posing no immediate threat to the officers involved. Moreover, by resorting to these methods the police were endangering the lives of the protesters because they might have caused them to fall to the ground from their perches in the trees.

Since the protest, no one in the city government has given a clear explanation of why these

methods were used. Nor has anyone made a plausible case for why it was imperative that the trees be cut on that particular day. No one has explained why the tree cutting started before the time of day allowed for noisy construction activities by city ordinances. No one has explained why the police showed up in riot gear before a significant protest had begun. Lt. Cushman complains the public is criticizing the police without knowing all the facts. If he has a concern about “the facts,” how does he justify the fact that no police officers were willing to testify to the Oregon State Police investigation of the incident? Serious questions need to be raised about police conduct on that day, and yet your reporter asked none of them, as far as I can tell from the article.

Let me make clear that I do not envy police officers. I have no doubt that policing Eugene or any other American city of comparable size and character is difficult. We should all be appreciative of the years of service that these two men gave to the community. But when there is such a strong indication that the police have overstepped the bounds of reasonable conduct and possibly trampled on the rights of the citizens present at this protest, they ought to be called upon to account for their behavior.

Ken Kirby
 Philosophy

SETA spreads information

In the article concerning the Students for the Ethical Treatment of Animals rally on Feb. 18, Richard Marrocco said that SETA was “looking for confrontation” and that we will “make mischief” (ODE, Feb. 19). SETA’s goal is to educate the public on the atrocities involved with animal testing. We do this by handing out information and holding rallies to bring public and media attention to our cause.

Marrocco made a statement that we ran, yelling and screaming, into the building, when in actuality we entered the building in an orderly fashion, carrying signs and voicing our opinions. The only people of “ill ilk” are the animal researchers on this campus and elsewhere. SETA had no intention of harming the laboratory equipment or research on Feb. 18, and we have no intentions of ever harming University property. We simply want to be heard.

SETA has requested a public forum discussing the logistics and ethics of animal research. However, when asked about our petition for such a forum, Steadman Upham, vice provost for research, replied we were wasting our time. This blatant disrespect of power in refusing to listen to the voices of students demonstrates how corrupt the University is.

Kristin Taylor
 SETA

FYI

Correction

In the story “Group targets eating disorders,” (ODE, Feb. 23) the counselor and University coordinator for Eating Disorders Awareness Week was misidentified. She should have been identified as Rachel Shephard. The Emerald regrets the error.

Letters Policy

The Emerald accepts letters from members of the University and Eugene community, preferably under 400 words. Shorter letters will receive higher priority. Op-ed pieces will only be printed, at the discretion of the editor, if they are written by an authority about a pertinent issue. Letters can be submitted in person at EMU, Suite 300, mailed to P.O. Box 3159, Eugene, OR, 97403, or e-mailed to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu. Please include your full name and telephone number for confirmation. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for length or style.