

NATIVE AMERICAN ACTIVIST GRABBED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT DURING PUBLIC TESTIMONY

As a Native American activist testified against a proposed gravel mine in Oakridge at an Oct. 12 Lane County Board of Commissioners meeting, a plainclothes law enforcement officer walked up, took her by the wrists and began placing her arms behind her back.

Commission Vice Chair Pat Farr, who stopped the officer, later called the incident a learning experience in terms of cultural sensitivity and discrimination.

Warm Springs tribe member Kayla Godowa Tufti, who is also a freelance opinion columnist for *Eugene Weekly*, says she was testifying at the meeting at Oakridge High School for herself and on behalf of her 1-year-old daughter whose future would be affected by the mining on TV Butte on the outskirts of Oakridge. The County Commission will decide whether the land will be rezoned from forest to quarry.

The proposed quarry mine, called Old Hazeldell, is a project of Ed King of King Estate Winery and bills itself as environmentally responsible on its website. Opponents of the mine question not only its sustainability but also its affect on neighbors, through dust, noise, trucks on the road and more. Godowa Tufti of the Warm Springs tribe is concerned about the mine destroying Native American cultural resources.

Godowa Tufti signed up to testify against the mine and also signed up on behalf of her daughter. In her own testimony she discussed her family's long history in the area, and the historic use of the area by the Chakgeenkni-Tufti band of Molalla Indians, who were among those who gathered foods such as camas, elk and huckleberries and camped at TV Butte.

Then when the next person was called, Godowa Tufti stayed at the podium and explained she was testifying for her daughter, J.C., who she said would be most affected by the proposed mine over the course of its 50-year existence.

Commissioner Chair Faye Stewart responded, "A 1-year-old give testimony?" And he told her she was wel-



AN OAKRIDGE POLICE OFFICER GRABS KAYLA GODOWA TUFTI

come to turn the comments in later. Godowa Tufti began reading.

As she read, a plainclothes officer walked up to the podium and reached for the paper Godowa Tufti was reading from. Video of the incident shows her politely requesting that he not touch her things. He then moved behind her and began to place her arms behind her back. As she continued to read, Farr walked up and had the officer desist.

"The tactics used only escalate a situation and make it unsafe for tribal people to testify publicly," Godowa Tufti says. "But I do hope this incident will give us an opportunity to discuss the abuse of power taking place in local government and law enforcement." She points out that "what happened was a violation of civil liberties. This creates an unsafe space for tribal people, families of color or families in general."

Warm Springs Tribal Council member Carina Miller testified next, saying she was shocked at the officer laying his hands on a native woman. She refuted the testimony of the cultural historians hired by the mine and called the research "dehumanizing." It was inappropriate for a non-native expert to tell native people who are the descendants of local tribes that they did not exist on the butte, she said.

Farr tells *EW* that it is standard to have law enforcement at County Commission meetings and when the meeting takes place in another city, like Oakridge, instead of its usual downtown Eugene location, the board uses local law enforcement.

Commissioner Stewart responded in a statement via Lane County Spokeswoman Devon Ashbridge: "We regret that Ms. Godowa Tufti's testimony was interrupted in a manner that was upsetting and could certainly be interpreted as disrespectful." And the statement says both Farr and Stewart sought Godowa Tufti out after the hearing to apologize.

The statement also says that the Oakridge officer responded when "Godowa Tufti declined to follow the established rules of the public hearing, which allows speakers each one three-minute comment period, by signing up to make a second, separate comment — which no other attendees were allowed to do."

Quarry spokesman Phil Donovan says, "I think Commissioner Farr nicely defused an awkward moment by instructing the officer to allow her to finish her testimony."

Farr says the incident was a learning experience for him, and, "When a person is discriminated against only they truly know how it feels."

Kevin Matthews, who previously ran against Stewart for his commission seat, also referenced the incident in his remarks and later told *EW*, "I've probably been to something like a hundred public hearings in Oregon over the last 20 years, and I've never seen anything remotely like what was done to a Native American woman at the county commissioners' hearing in Oakridge."

He adds, "It's a shocking level of double standard for a strip-mine opponent at the podium to be grabbed and restrained for handcuffing, for talking a little more than her allotted three minutes, when the strip-mine applicant had already gone on for some two hours, more than an hour over their stated time."

Written comment can be submitted on the proposed rezoning until Nov. 1. Send to Deanna.Wright@co.lane.or.us.



HAPPENING PEOPLE BY PAUL NEEVEL

SARA BILLDT

Born in Sonora, California, to a Native American mother and a European-American dad, Sara Billdt grew up in several small towns in the Sierra foothills. After her parents divorced, she and her father, Luther Billdt, moved to Phoenix, Oregon, near Medford. "My father sold cars," she says. "We were poor, but we had everything we needed." After high school graduation in 2003, she and her father moved to Eugene, where he has retired. She held a series of food service jobs and began to sing and play guitar on open mic nights at Cafe Paradiso. "My dad played guitar professionally in the '60s and '70s," she notes. More recently, she got into bartending, first at Cowfish Dance Club, and now in her third year at Blairally Vintage Arcade. "I feel that I've found my place," says Billdt, who also performs

on guitar and vocals with local rock band Coyote. "We usually have a show once a month." Late last summer, as she learned of indigenous peoples' pipeline protest in North Dakota, Billdt was moved to action. She created the Facebook group "Eugene Stands with Standing Rock" Sept. 4. A week later, she was on the road to North Dakota with two carloads of donated camping gear, along with her new Facebook friend Meesha Goldberg and her 68-year-old mom, Nellie Wooldridge, who had driven up from Sonora. "It was an amazing experience," she says. "I'll never forget the smell of campfire smoke, sage and sweetgrass." Following a fundraiser at Blairally last weekend, Billdt and Goldberg are planning another supply run to Standing Rock in December. They hope to stay for a month, camping in the cold Dakota winter.