

Warrenton police officer placed on leave after reports he mocked Floyd’s death

City seeks an independent review

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

WARRENTON — A white Warrenton police officer was placed on administrative leave after reports that he poked fun at George Floyd, a black man killed by Minneapolis police, while off duty at Bubba’s Sports Bar.

A Facebook post over the weekend described officer Robert Wirt and his “buddies at the bar poking fun at George Floyd yelling, ‘I can’t breathe,’ while one holds his forearm on his neck.”

Floyd was killed in May after a white police officer held his knee against Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes during an arrest for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. The officer was charged with second-degree murder.

Floyd’s death touched off protests around the world against police misconduct

and racism.

Warrenton Police Chief Mathew Workman said he began looking into the claims against Wirt on Sunday after learning of the Facebook post. The city decided to place Wirt on administrative leave on Monday and will hire an independent investigator to conduct a probe.

“I think it goes without saying that I hold my officers to a high standard and we investigate any allegations of misconduct both on and off duty,” he said. “And if something does happen and we figure it’s founded and that it did happen then we hold people accountable.”

The chief said that given the climate around law enforcement, the police department needs to be above reproach.

According to the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training website, Wirt was hired as a reserve by Warrenton police in 1997 and discharged in 2000. He was hired as a reserve again in 2009 and

reclassified as a police officer in 2013. He has served as a K-9 officer.

Wirt could not immediately be reached for comment.

“We condemn racism in all its forms and will not support any member who actually conducts themselves in this way,” Paul Putkey, the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 2746, which represents Warrenton police officers, said in an email.

Mayor Henry Balensifer said he supports the city’s decision to place Wirt on leave and hire an independent investigator.

“I think we’ve done a very good job of taking swift action on it. And I think allegations like that are something we take seriously, and I think the actions we have taken have shown that,” he said.

“The role of law enforcement is a job of public trust and it’s important that we maintain that.”



Black Lives Matter activists rally outside of the Liberty Theatre in Astoria in June.

Police: ‘There’s a rationale behind the way we’re handling’ protests

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conscious decision to actually not engage in,” Spalding said, citing jaywalking, loud noise and minor confrontations as examples.

“There’s multiple reasons why we do that. No. 1, we don’t want to engage with the individual who oftentimes may be looking for a fight and looking for a challenge and wants to have their cause picked up by the media,” he said.

So far, Spalding said, no situation has risen to the level of an arrest. The chief said, in some cases, the preferred method in larger group settings is to document the criminal activity and refer to the district attorney’s office to make a determination as to whether to file charges, which has the same end result and doesn’t deplete

necessary resources.

“I know there’s been some individuals who feel that maybe we should be dealing with some of these protesters a little bit differently, but there’s a rationale behind the way we’re handling these,” he said.

On Tuesday, meanwhile, the three judges of the Clatsop County Circuit Court — presiding Judge Dawn McIntosh, Judge Cindee Matyas and Judge Beau Peterson — issued a statement to address what they described as the “horrible and heartbreaking death” of Floyd and the protests that have spread across the nation.

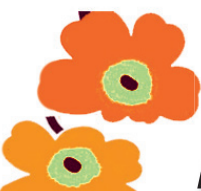
“Mr. Floyd’s death is having the kind of effect on our society that the countless deaths before him should have,” the statement said.

“There is movement to make significant changes to

many areas of our public and private lives; to renew the fight against racism and bias, whether overt, subtle, unconscious or unintentional. These are worthy goals, and the time has been too long in coming.

“As judges, we are ethically bound to limit what public positions we take and what public statements we make, but no rule of ethics can or should bar us from expressing these basic ideas: We, as judges, as citizens, as human beings promise to stand against racism, bias and oppression.

“We owe it to those we serve to ensure that every person who has business in our court will be treated fairly, regardless of race. We owe it to those we serve to ensure that all people are treated fundamentally equal in the eyes of the law and in our courtrooms.”



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