

Bozeman lawmaker speaking at event criticized by human rights network

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White

Montana Legislature

The Montana Human Rights Network is criticizing a forum where Bozeman Republican Rep. Kerry White plans to speak, claiming the event will promote anti-government conspiracy theories.

White is scheduled to speak at A “New” Code of the West in Whitefish on Oct. 13, hosted by This [West] is Our West, a Whitefish group. The organizer of the event said her intent was to have a discussion about issues important to Western states like property and civil rights, land and water.

According to the organization’s website, the event will host discussions on “The Deep State” and its impact in the West, federal overreach, federal Indian policy and public vs. private property rights, among others. The keynote speaker listed on the event’s program is Ammon Bundy, who led an armed takeover of an Oregon federal wildlife refuge in 2016, the Montana Human Rights Network said.

A post on the network’s website stated speakers for the event promote extremist conspiracy theories “that are used by the white supremacist movement.” It claims that This [West] is Our West’s website supports anti–government, anti-Indian and anti–environmental movements.

On its website, the Montana Human Rights Network claims White opposes conservation efforts and is a key player in a movement that draws funding from the mining industry. The network also stated that White has been a major supporter of transferring public lands to the states.

The website states White supported the Bundy family in its armed standoff with the federal government, pointing to an April 2014 Facebook post from White announcing plans to go to Nevada and stand with the Bundys.

White said the Montana Human Rights Network's post was full of slanderous and false statements about him and that he supported government, which is why he served in the state Legislature and had a role on the Gallatin County Planning Board. He said the group is misrepresenting his positions and his public service.

White said the forum was meant to be educational and that he was going to speak about the health effects wildfire smoke has on people. He said he researched the speakers at the event and found no evidence of what the human rights group is claiming.

"It doesn't even require a response from me," White said. "People know who I am and what I stand for and the work I did for the state and county."

In an email to the Chronicle, Laura Lee O'Neil, organizer for the event and founder of the website This West is Our West, said the speakers were carefully selected based on their knowledge of the event's topics. O'Neil said she respected the network's First Amendment rights but disagreed with the slanderous name-calling about her and the speakers for the event.

"Our event is in no way advocating or supporting an extremist, violent, anti-government, anti-Indian agenda," O'Neil said.

The website, O'Neil said, promotes uniting Western states and protecting constitutional rights. She said it is shameful that Montana Human Rights Network resorts to name calling and fabricating lies because others have differing opinions. It is beneficial to debate issues and policies, but O'Neil said there is no reason to slander others because they are expressing their own opinions.

A group of former and current lawmakers and public advocates have decried the event, which is scheduled for Oct. 13, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., at the Grouse Mountain Lodge in Whitefish.

On the same day, the Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Human Rights Network and Love Lives Here are hosting an opposing event. Montana Undivided: A Rally for Human Rights and Public Lands will start at 10 a.m., at Depot Park in Whitefish.