

Big brother was watching

Maryland State Police conducted undercover espionage on Takoma Park activists

BY MICHAEL FROST

Takoma Park's reputation as a liberal bastion was reinforced by the recent revelation that undercover Maryland State Police officers conducted surveillance on activist groups within the city.

According to documents obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union, members of the State Police Homeland Security and Intelligence Division monitored the activities of anti-death penalty groups in Takoma Park as part of a 14-month investigation of activist groups in Maryland.

The 46 pages of documents, released to the public on July 17, include reports on two meetings in 2005, one held on March 14 at the Elektrik Maid "activist center" and the other on April 6 at Takoma Park Town Hall, that were held to protest the impending execution of Vernon Evans.

Evans, convicted of committing contract murder in 1983, received a stay of execution in 2006.

The documents, downloadable from the ACLU's web site, also chronicle surveillance of Baltimore-area groups including the American Friends Service Committee.

"I'm outraged by it," said State Sen. Jamie Raskin, D- Dist. 20. He called it an infringement on civil liberties and a "ridiculous waste" of taxpayer money.

Raskin, a member of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, said that the chairman of the committee, Brian Frosh, D- Dist. 16, has called for hearings to begin in September. Raskin is also working on legislation that would forbid targeting citizens based on their political beliefs and require a certain level of evidence to initiate any investigation.

Maryland State Police spied on activists at this Takoma, DC, location.

In addition to his duties as state senator, Raskin also teaches constitutional law at American University. He said that while the Supreme Court has been tolerant of undercover police activity in public places as a Fourth Amendment issue, in this case "it is indeed a First Amendment problem."

"We are planning to get to the bottom of this," he said.

This sentiment was shared by Ryan O'Donnell of Common Cause Maryland, a public advocacy organization.

"There needs to be some kind of reckoning to figure out exactly what went on and why," he said, adding that this should include former Gov. Bob Ehrlich's role, if any.

The disclosure "illustrates just how

deeply our rights are being eroded," O'Donnell said. "We need to make sure this never happens again."

State Police Colonel Terrence B. Sheridan said that the process began with a request by a Special Operations Division commander, who asked for help determining necessary resources for maintaining order at events related to the planned executions of Wesley Baker and Vernon Evans.

"A previous commander of the Homeland Security and Intelligence Division made the decision to have a trooper work to collect information from public meetings and open sources," said Sheridan, according to a transcript of a July 25 news conference released by his office.

The State Police also released a document dated March 25, 2005, detailing an action plan for the Evans execution. The last of eight objectives listed states, "Protect the fundamental right of free speech as guaranteed under the United States Constitution and ensure individuals are afforded the opportunity to express opinions openly and without fear of reprisal when exercised within the spirit and intent of the law."

Takoma Park Mayor Bruce Williams raised the issue at the City Council meeting on July 28, saying, "A number of people are rightly interested and concerned about this issue, and I think that we won't hear the end of this for a long time."

Pat Loveless, wearing a "Save Vernon Evans" T-shirt and carrying an American flag atop his white cane, was more optimistic than most. "To me, it doesn't bother me one way or another. Maybe they'll learn something out of it," he said. "Maybe they'll learn a little bit of what's really going on in our country."

"We must be having some kind of effect on our government if they feel like they have to stoop that low to spy on us," he said.

Nancy Abbot Young fondly remembered an interfaith protest at city hall before the initial invasion of Iraq.

"Many years later, we have all lived through 'Shock and Awe' and the aftermath," she said. "Those of us who participated on the eve of the war and continued to have done that were very distressed by what we read about the Maryland police."

The ACLU initiated Freedom of Information Act requests in 2006 after speculation that the Department of Defense was monitoring anti-war and social justice

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