

Panel on Burns wasn't about fear

Fearmongering was neither the intent nor the outcome of the community conversation held at the WNMU Global Resource Center on Tuesday evening, Feb. 16, co-sponsored by the Gila Resources Information Project and Gila/Mimbres Community Radio. From our five panelists, the 130 attendees and more than 160 viewers of a live video stream heard:

- A brief history of the armed takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, with an eyewitness account of the impact armed supporters of the takeover had on the nearby town of Burns, Ore.
- Apprehension about loss of tourism and business revenues that would be likely if Silver City and Grant County were to experience an influx of supporters carrying firearms in the event of a similar armed standoff in our area.
- Concern for the personal well-being of Adrian Sewell and his family, now and if he follows through with his announced intention to defy the federal government and call for aid from armed supporters when his existing permit to graze cattle on public lands expires at the end of this month — February 2016.
- A description of probable loss of access to public lands in the event of an armed standoff by sportspeople, including hunters, anglers, hikers, and backpackers.
- Affirmation of the Grant County sheriff's commitment to uphold public safety, with respect for the rights of all, and with encouragement to community members to work with law enforcement to that end. The sheriff confirmed that an incident of concern occurred a few days ago on Bear Mountain Road. In response, patrols have been increased there.

The majority of time in the

community conversation was devoted to statements from attendees, who represented a broad spectrum of backgrounds, concerns and viewpoints.

Ranchers described their experiences and expressed their frustrations in dealings with the federal government. Some affirmed their friendship with Adrian Sewell and his family, recounting their efforts to persuade him not to travel to Oregon to publicly renounce his

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grazing permit, and their regret that he did so.

Sharply contrasting interpretations of the history and meaning of the armed takeover of the Malheur Refuge and other public lands were stated by attendees, including disagreement about basic facts. Strong commitment to nonviolence, dialogue, and negotiation was voiced by many.

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one another as antagonists.

One speaker described the assistance he had received from Adrian and Courtney Sewell when they found him with his vehicle disabled in snowy conditions on a remote section of Bear Mountain Road, with a friendship resulting. Another friend of the Sewell family read aloud a message she received from Courtney Sewell during the community conversation.

In our judgment, this gathering achieved many of its objectives. Community members with highly varied points of view spoke to one another and received a respectful hearing. Unlike the community of Harney County and Burns in Oregon, which Harney County Sheriff David Ward described as having newly recognized divisions after the armed takeover ended, this community conversation acknowledged divisions forthrightly and discussed them thoughtfully.

At the conclusion, planners of the event received many expressions of appreciation from attendees whose contrasting perspectives were evident in the discussion. We see this as a first step in a continuing dialogue that can enable the community we love to move forward together to avoid a dangerous situation.

Far from sowing “seeds of mistrust and suspicion,” this community conversation provided an opportunity for those attending to express themselves and bring attention to their concerns, and for those listening to hear an exchange of views that we hope will be a basis for further community conversations that will identify areas of agreement and avenues for reconciling differences.

Allyson Siwik, a resident of Silver City, is the executive director of the Gila Resources Information Project. Jamie Newton is chair of the board of directors of Gila/Mimbres Community Radio. He lives in Mimbres.