

Akron hosts ACLU members for public hearing

By: Andrew Hampp, Daily Kent Stater

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Akron-based immigration and business lawyer Farhad Sethna held the tiny document in his hand and began to tell the audience about his preferred method of defense.

"The U.S. Constitution is a real weapon of mass destruction," Sethna said as he held up a small bound copy of the government document. "I believe in it. That's why I traveled 15,000 miles from home to study here, live here and work here."

Sethna's words echoed the sentiments of many Summit and Portage County residents who gave testimony as part of a public hearing held in the Akron Main Public Library last night. The hearing was held in response to secret surveillance conducted by the Department of Defense at an Iraq funeral march in downtown Akron on March 19, 2005.

Ohio Sens. Mike DeWine and George Voinovich were invited to attend, as were Reps. Tim Ryan and Sherrod Brown. Only Mike West of Brown's Akron bureau and Frank Kunstel of the American Civil Liberties Union were able to attend.

Many perspectives and theories were given regarding the increased paranoia the citizens shared following the news of the protest being spied upon by the Counterintelligence Field Activity branch of the Department of Defense.

Testimonials were heard from war veterans, activists and concerned citizens.

"I feel violated as a citizen but also as a taxpayer," Joe Mosyjowski of Hartville said. "There was a lesson learned after Hurricane Katrina - if something goes wrong, we're on our own. I don't recognize my city anymore. It needs investigated and people need prosecuted."

Kunstel asked several of the citizens questions regarding possible violence during the March protest. All who testified said no violence occurred at the event, and there was no reason to believe there would have been any based on information provided in a press release issued prior to the demonstration.

"I remember one person wanted to get tear-gassed, but he pretty much shut up after that," said Steve Riley, a senior international relations major at The University of Akron. "I wasn't surprised (by the surveillance.) That's not (the government) trying to monitor public opinion, that's trying to shape it."

Greg Coleridge, economic justice and empowerment program director for the American Friends Service Committee, said news of the surveillance was broken to him when NBC News reported on the contents of a 400-page government surveillance document in December.

Eight pages from the document were released to the public, which contained information on two surveillance incidents in Northeast Ohio, including the protest in Akron. Coleridge said he has reason to believe that similar instances have occurred at other area locations, possibly even Kent State.

"We don't necessarily believe (the Akron protesters are) deserving of this attention - we're not all that special," he said. "You may be having something (like this) much closer to home, but we won't know for a while."

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