

Occupy Albany: Change in Direction

The national Occupy movement drew negative press over the weekend, as arrests, disease and criminal activity plagued the otherwise peaceful "tent cities" set up in municipalities across America. At least one major television network counted Albany, New York among so-called "occupy-troubled cities" --- with concerns being raised that the protest may be turning into an "act of defiance" - WAMC's Dave Lucas reports.

Concern that the peaceful movement is changing in character was fueled by a call issued on Occupy Albany's facebook page soliciting others to come to Albany to beef up the number of First Amendment rights protesters at state-owned Lafayette Park. "Heather" is with Occupy Albany's public relations arm - she tells WAMC that the call has gone out because Governor Andrew Cuomo has specifically said he will not tolerate protesters on state land after 11pm.

In each of the major cities where Occupy camps have been set up, one individual emerges as what some might label a "poster child" for the movement - in Albany, it's 39-year old Bradley Russell - who first attracted media attention in October when he was involved in a scuffle with another man - "Heather" says many would profoundly disagree that Russell represents the totality of what Occupy Albany is about.

Russell told one area TV crew that media attention helps grow the movement. He was arrested while attempting to set up a "freedom fort" Saturday afternoon in Lafayette Park - 37 arrests followed, mostly on trespassing charges after Occupiers stayed in Lafayette Park past an 11pm curfew.

District Attorney David Soares' office has told media outlets that when the activists show up for their appearance tickets in Albany City Court, charges will be dismissed. Governor Cuomo could decide to overrule the D-A: Tom Carr, a partner with local law firm Tulley Rinckey, explains that there is legal precedent - back in the mid-90s when New York State reinstated the death penalty, Bronx DA Robert Johnson said he didn't believe in the death penalty and would not enforce it. What happened in that case was, any death-penalty eligible cases from the Bronx were handed over to the Attorney General. Carr thinks David Soares could benefit from such a move, possibly enhancing his standing in the community.

For those longing to see an end to the tent city, Tom Carr believes Occupy Albany will fizzle out as the weather changes. For now, the protesters are sticking it out. Members of a group calling itself "Occupy Albany's Radical Caucus" issued a statement Monday challenging -quote- "the property rights system which forms the legal basis for many of the material injustices done upon the 99%." The group declined to go on tape but admitted that eight of their members were among those arrested over the weekend.