

WFN Officers Need More Respect

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Despite being on the job for 18 months, WFN law enforcement officer Richard Johns says many reserve residents still don't know about the force. Jason Luciw/Capital News

By Jason Luciw - Kelowna Capital News

They've been at work for almost 18 months now, but the Westbank First Nation's two law enforcement officers are finding it tough to make their presence known on the band's two Westside and three Kelowna reserves.

WFN law enforcement officers are responsible for ensuring everyone visiting, living and working on WFN land obeys the laws that the First Nation council has established, handling everything from panhandlers and noise complaints to gun offenses and drug dealing.

However, Richard Johns says he and his partner Dan Heaton are finding many people don't take them seriously because they're not RCMP members.

Yet, the public must realize that WFN law enforcement officers are empowered to protect both the community and band lands, he said.

"It's really surprising," said Johns. "People will say, 'Who are you? You have no authority here.'"

WFN officers don't have the ability to charge anyone, but they can issue fines under the WFN Self Government Act and make arrests for indictable offenses under the Criminal Code of Canada, detaining someone until an RCMP officer arrives to take over.

"Once we give people that information, their whole attitude changes," explained Johns.

Unfortunately, too much time is spent having to explain their roles, keeping officers from moving on to the next complaint, he added.

The Capital News accompanied Johns on a call out to a Cougar Road residence this week, to get an idea of some of the matters he's required to deal with on a daily basis.

The Thursday morning incident involved a woman accused of trespassing and dumping sewage on private property.

It turned out to be an unwanted tenant who had set up her motor home on the land and wasn't paying rent. The landlord complained that several vehicles were coming and going from the place at all hours of the day and night and the homeowner suspected drug activity.

Johns gave the woman and her roommates one week to move off the land. If she is not gone by June 1, the woman faces a \$250 fine every 24 hours, for as long as she remains on the property. The motor home could be towed away too, said Johns.

The illegal dumping of sewage could cost the woman a further \$125 to \$1,000, depending on the seriousness of the offense.

But Johns noted that his primary goal is not to issue tickets, but rather to try to settle a matter as amicably as possible.

"I don't like to hand out a bunch of tickets (even though) some people think that's all we do," he said. "And no, that's not the case, we just want compliance."

Thursday's call to Cougar Road was fairly tame, compared to the most tense call Johns said he's answered in the last 18 months.

"I was up at Gallagher's (reserve), came around the corner and there was a guy with a gun shooting out into the field," said Johns.

Fortunately, the matter went down with any incident in the end.

"He said he was just target shooting but I tried to explain that there were WFN members who fish and camp right in that same area. A stray bullet could have killed somebody."