



CITY OF BILLINGS

BILL COLE, MAYOR

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STATEMENT CONDEMNING RACIST AND ANTI-GAY VANDALISM

February 5, 2018

In the last two weeks, our town has experienced two incidents of criminal vandalism that stained our community with the ugly mark of racist and anti-gay graffiti. On the night of January 23, 2018 one or more vandals spray-painted images, in one combination or another, of male genitalia, a swastika, "666," and the initials "KKK" on the walls of Lewis & Clark Middle School, Billings Senior High School, and on a public walkway in Pioneer Park. That same week someone posted anti-LGBTQ literature in the lobby of Grace Methodist Church on Avenue B. On February 1st, someone spray-painted a swastika on a rainbow flag posted in front of the church.

Racist and bigoted criminality and hate speech of this or any type is deplorable, despicable, degrading and has no place in Billings or any other community. Every effort is being made to apprehend and punish the criminal perpetrator(s).

I, the Billings City Council, the Billings Police Department, the employees of the City of Billings, and most importantly – our neighbors and fellow citizens stand shoulder-to-shoulder in condemning this cowardly, criminal behavior in the most unequivocal and unambiguous terms. Although we do not yet know who was responsible, we do know that this was not a prank or other minor infraction that can be tolerated. Swastikas and hate speech are intended to intimidate and deprive others of their human dignity. They imply a threat of physical violence that is unmistakable when viewed through the eyes of our friends and neighbors who are Native American, Hispanic, Black, gay, or belong to other racial, ethnic or cultural groups. Today we stand arm-in-arm and say again in a unified and forceful voice: **"Not in Our Town!"**

In June of last year Mayor Hanel, with the support of the entire City Council, issued a proclamation opposing violence and hate and supporting civility and tolerance. It proclaimed that "hate crimes, bigotry or any other form of discrimination towards a member of any group is detrimental to the well-being and growth of the City of Billings and, therefore, should not be tolerated in the City of Billings." This is a moral imperative; not just an economic one. All citizens, regardless of race, religion, sex, gender identity or sexual preference deserve to feel safe and welcome in their hometown.

But we also recognize that words, although important, are not enough in themselves. Those who may legitimately feel threatened by these crimes are entitled to know what their city

Billings Pride:
City-wide

is doing to prevent similar crimes in the future, including whether it has the legal tools it needs and the commitment to use them. The answer to those questions is an unqualified "yes."

Our laws prohibiting criminal trespass, criminal mischief, desecration of a place of worship and other offenses should provide ample legal grounds for criminal prosecution once the perpetrators are identified and apprehended. In just a few minutes I will ask Chief St. John to provide us with an update on the status of the considerable efforts that are being made by the Billings Police Department, the FBI, and other law-enforcement partners to solve these crimes. I commend the BPD and our partners in responding immediately when these events occurred and continuing to make them a very high priority. Chief St. John informs me that the school resource officers and Street Crimes Unit, in addition to other personnel, have been mobilized to focus on this matter. I believe that our friends in law enforcement have several leads, and I hope they will bear fruit soon. I encourage members of the public to report any information they might have by calling the Billings Police Department or Billings Crime Stoppers at 245-6660.

I also commend School District 2 and the Billings Department of Parks, Recreation & Public Lands for acting immediately to remove the graffiti, thereby depriving the perpetrator or perpetrators of the stage from which they hoped to broadcast their despicable message to a broader audience.

I would also like to reassure the public that I and other council members are working to help solve these crimes and stand against hate speech in our community. As soon as I learned of these events I immediately contacted Chief St. John, City Administrator Bruce McCandless, and School Superintendent Terry Bouck to stress the importance of solving these crimes and offering whatever assistance I could provide. I am sure that other council members did the same. I and other council members attended the Not in Our Town forum held at Grace Methodist Church after the first incident, and in recent days we have responded to numerous emails and telephone calls from concerned citizens. I spoke with a representative of Grace Methodist Church this weekend to express my personal condemnation of these acts, at which time I learned that the church intends to upgrade its own security system as best it can. Those efforts will require money, and I encourage the whole community to help in that way. I have contacted several larger churches to see if they can be of assistance, and I will work hard to make sure Grace Methodist and the LGBTQ community it serves are protected from threats and intimidation.

Respectfully,


William A. Cole, Mayor
City of Billings













