

## **Bellingham City Council members angered by rifle-toting men downtown**

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A militia group has agreed to stop patrolling downtown Bellingham with military-style rifles slung over their shoulders, Police Chief David Doll told the City Council during a Monday afternoon committee meeting held online.

Doll told the council that he talked to one of the men, who said they were part of a national organization called the Three Percenters, and told him that the group's presence was making people uncomfortable at a time when the nation is mourning the latest instances of black Americans killed by police and by white vigilantes.

"I asked him to consider the implications of his actions," Doll told the council. "Since that time, I'm thankful that the group has chosen not to display their weapons."

Doll didn't name the man, and said that the man and the people he was with hadn't committed a crime or made overt threats.

Openly carrying a firearm is legal in Washington state.

But council member Dan Hammill said the armed men clearly intended to terrorize bystanders.

"Why weren't these people charged with anything?" Hammill said. "It's clear they were trying to intimidate people of color."

Mayor Seth Fleetwood said the group's actions were provocative.

"It's really disturbing," Fleetwood said.

He urged Bellingham residents to contact their legislators and ask them to change state firearms laws.

Only five U.S. states ban residents from carrying firearms in public, according to OpenCarry.org.

Three Percenters are an anti-government militia group, according to the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center, which track racist organizations in the U.S.

But the organization, which formed after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, claims on its website that it isn't a militia and isn't anti-government.

According to posts at a Facebook group called Bellingham Living and elsewhere on social media, men and women drove around in black pickup trucks on Railroad Avenue and other places downtown last week.

Photos and video posted on social media show them standing near their trucks, holding military-style semiautomatic rifles.

Ben Scholtz, owner of Mallard Ice Cream on Railroad Avenue, wrote on his business' Facebook page that the incident "adds a significant concern for the people who live, work, and shop" in downtown Bellingham.

"In my opinion, the open-carry of firearms downtown make everyone less safe," Scholtz wrote. "The men bringing guns downtown claim to be protecting property from looting, but their actions feel like an attack on the positive efforts to bring about urgently need change. Please leave your weapons at home."