

DOOR STAYS OPEN AT LIBRARY, PRETTY MUCH - CITY REVIEWS POLICY AFTER GROUP BARRED

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The city is reviewing its policy on use of the public library auditorium after a white supremacist group signed up to use it under a deceptive name earlier this month.

Mayor Joseph Curtatone said he believes the policy is strong, but the city "may make some adjustments to how it is administered."

"We're just going back over it," he said.

The Arkansas-based group White Revolution billed itself as Immigration Reform Party when it applied to use the auditorium for a meeting May 7. When police informed Curtatone of the group's identity, he closed the library, citing a security risk to its patrons and to members of the group itself, because of possible counter-protests. As police supervised, the group met briefly in the parking lot.

The first paragraph of the library policy states that the Board of Trustees and library staff do not discriminate "on the basis of political beliefs of applicant groups, or on any other constitutionally or statutorily prohibited basis," and Curtatone said this will not change.

"I don't support these groups, and I don't want them in my city, but I'm sworn to uphold the United States Constitution as a lawyer and as an elected official," he said. "I believe in the freedom of speech and the right to assemble, but at the same time I need to ensure public safety for all, which includes the people that live in this city as well as those who are assembling."

Curtatone said he did not allow the group entrance into the library because of a lack of documentation defining their group and misrepresentation on their application.

City Solicitor John Gannon said that there are "content-neutral restrictions" that disqualified White Revolution from using the auditorium.

The policy states that "any false, misleading or incomplete statement on the application form shall be grounds to forbid the use of the auditorium by the applicant group."

Curtatone said the city might make changes to how the policy is administered to prevent the confusion that ensued over the White Revolution meeting.

Library Director Ellen Rawch said she will review each application more closely now, but does not intend to ask for police assistance.

"We want to do what is cost-effective and smart," she said. "We don't want to waste the police chief's time by having him review the applications of a needlework group or something."

The Somerville policy was written after the Wakefield Public Library dealt with a similarly controversial group. In 2002 the now-incarcerated white supremacist Matthew Hale organized a meeting that Wakefield library director Sharon Gilley said went off without incident because officials had enough time to prepare.

"It was an interesting experience for people to have to come to terms with equal application of free speech," she said. "And so you can't write a policy that precludes that."

Rawch agreed.

"It can be a struggle to maintain First Amendment rights and maintain public safety," she said.

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