

Assault charge recommended against RCMP officer after arrest caught on video

ADRIAN NIEOCZYM

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A charge of assault causing bodily harm has been recommended against Kelowna RCMP Constable Geoff Mantler, after a video surfaced in which a man was kicked in the head during an arrest. The announcement came Sunday as the clock ticked down toward a protest rally in Kelowna that police were worried could turn violent.

“That’s amazing,” said protest organizer John Hewitson, when told the news an hour before the rally’s start.

The video of Buddy Tavares’s arrest triggered an outpouring of public outrage and inspired Mr. Hewitson to start a Facebook page calling for assault charges against Constable Geoff Mantler that has attracted over 6,000 supporters.

In the lead up to Sunday’s protest, Mr. Hewitson repeatedly emphasized its peaceful intent, but local media reports and online chatter suggested there were elements planning to attend who wanted to pick a fight with police. Kelowna RCMP Superintendent Bill McKinnon took the unusual step of calling a press conference Saturday afternoon to discuss the event.

“Peaceful protest is part of our democracy and they have a right to protest,” he told reporters.

But Supt. McKinnon also said his worst fear was that “outside dissidents” would hijack the rally. “We saw some of it at the Olympics, certainly some things took place at the G8/G20. It’s always people who aren’t actually part of the real formal protest group that get involved and are there just to create havoc.”

Mr. Hewitson was critical of both the media and police.

“The media was kind of trying to fuel it, to get a future story” he said. “And the way that [Supt.] McKinnon responded to questions, I felt in some ways was inviting a problem. They took the focus away from it being a peaceful process to being a potential grenade waiting to go off.”

In the end, about 250 people of all ages turned out at a downtown Kelowna park under grey skies and marched without incident to the RCMP detachment three blocks away.

Mr. Hewitson co-ordinated the route with police, who closed off the street in front of the detachment and even lent Mr. Hewitson a bullhorn so he could address the crowd.

As Supt. McKinnon watched the protest from a window and an officer videotaped the gathering from the detachment roof, protesters peacefully drummed, chanted and demanded an end to

police violence.

Many of the signs in the crowd noted other violent incidents involving police in B.C., such as the tasing death of Robert Dziekanski at Vancouver Airport.

A cheer went through the crowd when Mr. Hewitson announced the charge recommendation against Constable Mantler.

But the news couldn't quell the skepticism of some protesters.

"I think if people weren't arranging this sort of protest, they wouldn't have charged him," said 21-year-old protester Caitlin Eistetter.

The charge recommendation was made by detectives with the Abbotsford Police Department, the outside police force that was called in to investigate Constable Mantler. The department spokesman, Constable Ian MacDonald, said the announcement was made because the investigation is complete.

"We certainly were well aware of the fact that there was going to be a protest today," he said. "But we couldn't let that be a guiding factor for us."

Mr. Tavares was arrested on Jan. 7 for allegedly firing a shotgun on the grounds of the Harvest Golf Club in Kelowna. He has been charged with careless use of a firearm.

Mr. Tavares attended Sunday's rally and said he was glad to hear of the charges pending against Constable Mantler. Mr. Tavares said that despite all he has been through he still respects the police.

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