

Mystery list may trace to team

By Mary Jo Almquist

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The whodunit mystery surrounding the do-not-admit list for President Bush's Fargo visit still hasn't been solved, but clues uncovered Friday indicate a worker with the White House advance team may have been the culprit.

This comes just one day after spokesmen for the White House and North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven said the list was the result of "an overzealous volunteer."

The list contained the names of 42 people who were not supposed to be given tickets to Bush's speech Thursday. Thirty-three of them belong to the local progressive group Democracy for America.

The White House advance team was comprised of several people -- some state and local volunteers; others White House staff people -- who came to Fargo ahead of time to prepare for the event.

White House spokesman Jim Morrell said Friday the overzealous volunteer could "very well be" someone from the advance team, but he doesn't know who it was.

The White House wasn't aware the list was being created or distributed and regrets that it happened, Morrell said.

The White House also is taking steps to ensure nothing like this happens again, by reiterating to volunteers that "this is not acceptable," he said.

Bush stopped in Fargo to pitch his plan to overhaul the Social Security program. Free tickets were handed out Tuesday afternoon at the Fargodome and the Fargo-Moorhead Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Officials from both buildings say they had no involvement with the list, but were aware it existed.

"The Fargodome had nothing to do with this other than to provide the venue (for ticket distribution)," said Rob Sobolik, Fargodome general manager.

Sobolik thinks he saw the list Tuesday when he was asked to make photocopies. The list he saw contained names, but Sobolik said he didn't look at who was on it and didn't ask how it would be used.

At the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, Executive Director Cole Carley said he was aware of the list but also had nothing to do with creating it, nor did anyone from his staff.

"Our only involvement was that we were asked to be an outlet for the tickets," Carley said.

The list arrived in one of two boxes containing tickets and other forms. People who showed up for tickets were asked to write down names and addresses of anyone attending the event on the forms, which Carley believes were then returned to the White House.

CVB staff members, several of whom were asked to help hand out tickets, were told to alert a representative from the governor's office if someone from the list tried to get a ticket.

At the CVB, that representative was James Burgum, a former North Dakota State University student who now works in the governor's office.

Don Larson, a spokesman for Hoeven, said Friday that Burgum is out of state on vacation. A message left on Burgum's cell phone late Friday was not returned and previous attempts to reach him earlier in the week were unsuccessful.

Larson said Burgum told him he got the list, along with the tickets and forms, from the White House advance team.

If anyone from the list tried to get tickets, Burgum was instructed to take the person aside and explain to them that this wasn't a political rally and to make sure they weren't intending to be disruptive, Larson said.

Neither Burgum nor anyone from the governor's staff had anything to do with creating the list, Larson said.

No one was denied access, he added.

The Fargodome site was staffed with multiple Republican Party volunteers during ticket distribution.

Jason Stverak, executive director of the North Dakota Republican Party, was one those people.

An attempt to reach him by cell phone Friday during his trip back to Bismarck was unsuccessful.

But Stverak told the Forum Thursday it will be impossible to find out who the overzealous volunteer was.

The list was leaked to The Forum Wednesday and verified with two sources close to the ticket distribution process, who asked to be anonymous for fear of retribution. The list was further confirmed by several citizens who said they noticed the list when they went to get tickets.

Reaction from people named on the list has been mixed. Some believe they have been unfairly singled out and have done nothing to deserve the publicity.

Others wear the designation as a badge of honor.

For Tom McMahon, executive director of Democracy for America based in Burlington, Vt., the exposure has been positive.

McMahon said he's been getting calls from multiple media outlets, and it's helped bring attention to Democracy for America, a group formed after Howard Dean dropped out of the presidential race.

The group has chapters across the country, including in Fargo.

The do-not-admit list used in this case is not the same as a Secret Service watch list, which would contain names of people who pose an actual threat, McMahon said.

The Secret Service, along with Fargo police, said Thursday they had no part in creating the list or using it.

At the same time, McMahon said he doesn't believe an overzealous volunteer created the list and said it more likely came from the White House.

This isn't the first time the White House has had an overzealous volunteer. In 2003, an overzealous volunteer was blamed for an incident in which Bush gave a speech about the economy in front of some boxes wrongfully stamped with the "Made in the USA" label. They were actually made in China.

"This was the work of an overzealous advance volunteer," White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan said at the time, according to CNN.com.

Fargo City Commissioner Linda Coates, whose name was on the list but who attended Bush's speech anyway, also doubts this is the product of a local volunteer.

Coates said when she went through the metal detectors at the Bison Sports Arena Thursday, an official said to her, "You are of course welcome to go in. We're sorry about this. We heard from the White House that it was the work of an overzealous staffer."

Though Coates said she doesn't know whose "staffer" he was talking about, he didn't call the person a volunteer.

"The enigmatic local volunteer is typically blamed for these types of heavy-handed moves," she said. "Impossible to trace and leaves the administration staff completely off the hook."

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