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Former school counselor says he's a target after drug arrest

Monday, February 16, 2006

By Pam Gehl
Special to the Gazette

SOUTH HAVEN -- A former Bloomingdale Public Schools counselor arrested on a marijuana-possession charge said he has been targeted for prosecution because he has been a member of national groups critical of drug laws.

Greg Francisco is a former board member of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws and a former member of Educators for Sensible Drug Policies.

Van Buren District Judge Arthur Clarke III ordered during a hearing Wednesday that a trial be scheduled within 60 to 75 days to decide Francisco's guilt or innocence on the misdemeanor charge, connected to a May 5 incident in the Bloomingdale Junior High School parking lot.

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"I write lots and lots of letters to the editor, and I send them all over the United States and Canada and Europe on the efficacy of the war on drugs," said Francisco, 48, of Paw Paw. "It is not that I advocate using drugs, it is just that what we are doing is just making the problem worse."

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The case has attracted the attention of advocates for drug-law reform from across the state.

Charles Ream, a trustee in Scio Township, near Ann Arbor, and a member of Michigan's chapter of NORML, attended Wednesday's hearing.

He said the case would get national media attention if it goes to trial.

"This is a free-speech case," Ream said, referring to Francisco's writings on drug-law reform. "It has nothing to do with drugs."

Van Buren County Assistant Prosecutor Cory Johnson said Francisco has not been targeted and that prosecution in the case is a routine matter.

"Until the case was brought to my attention I had never heard of Mr. Francisco," Johnson said.


A search of Francisco's truck was conducted May 5 in the school parking lot after a drug-detecting canine was brought to the school for a routine check. Francisco said he had cooperated in the past, allowing routine searches when detection dogs were drawn to his vehicle, but decided to refuse the May search on principle.

According to a discussion by both Johnson and defense attorney Matthew Abel during Wednesday's hearing, after the dog targeted Francisco's truck, a stem and some roach material that tested positive for marijuana were found.

Francisco said he already has lost his job over the matter because he was forced to resign after the May search. Bloomingdale Public Schools Superintendent Dale Schreuder said Francisco resigned voluntarily.

"This will take his livelihood and all because of a stem the size of a toothpick on the floor of his truck," Francisco's wife, Amy, said.

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