

# Power in protest: Activists increasingly take their message to the masses

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## FULL TEXT

Dec. 17--BEMIDJI -- The streets of Bemidji have become a stage.

That's because, time and again throughout the past year, local activists have taken their message to the masses through demonstrations, marches and protests. And though one demonstration or march may not have anything to do with the next, activists increasingly have used the method to bring attention to their respective causes.

They've held up traffic, and they've shut down whole city blocks. They've danced, they've chanted, they've sung and they've screamed. At times, they've stood in silence. And -- in one way or another -- they've been heard.

"People are interested in getting their voices heard. Protest is a legitimate method of doing so," said Colleen Greer, BSU sociology professor. "Local individuals may, if they see themselves as blocked from actively engaging with leaders who could hear them, either nationally or locally, engage in protest."

The most recent protests have been in response to the officer-involved shooting of 34-year-old Vernon May. On Nov. 30, about 60 people marched from the Paul and Babe statues to the Law Enforcement Center to protest the shooting, which allegedly happened during a traffic stop after an officer struggled with May for control of a firearm. Several other demonstrations were also planned in response to the May shooting in the following weeks.

But the protests against the shooting are only the most recent in a growing list that have taken place to address both local and national issues.

In September, a small handful of people gathered outside the Beltrami County Courthouse to bring attention to the fact that a third inmate had died in the county jail within a two-year period.

In October, the friends and family of Aaron Krabbenhoft marched more than two miles in the rain from Krabbenhoft's former apartment to Paul and Babe where they held a small rally. They then continued marching to the Law Enforcement Center to bring attention to what they say is the mislabeling of Krabbenhoft's death as a suicide rather than a homicide.

In August, protesters shut down the intersection of Third Street and Beltrami Avenue to protest the Enbridge Line 3 replacement project. For more than three hours, a crowd brought long banners to section off the intersection, shutting down traffic from four different streets. It resulted in authorities issuing multiple citations.

In May, a group of Native American activists went fishing on Lake Bemidji a day before the annual statewide opener to protest what they viewed as the infringement on their treaty rights. They intended to get ticketed and then use the time in court to voice their concerns.

Not all demonstrations have been focused on local issues, either.

On Nov. 8, a group of approximately 60 people brought their signs to the Paul and Babe statues to support the Robert Mueller probe after President Donald Trump fired then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions. A photo of the group was sent to "The Rachel Maddow Show," who included it on air in a rundown of similar demonstrations across the country.

"People were out on the road in super-snowy Bemidji, Minnesota tonight," Maddow said from her nationally viewed show.

The year also has included marches that show promise of turning into annual events. In February, approximately

130 people gathered for the second year to march for missing and murdered indigenous women. A month earlier, about 500 people came out for the second Bemidji Women's March. The annual March for Life also was held in January.

Like the demonstration in support of the Mueller investigation, the local Women's March was part of a much larger movement that brought thousands of people together in cities all across the country.

#### Local response

Effective though they may be in amplifying an issue, Bemidji Police Chief Mike Mastin said demonstrations carry challenges for the authorities. One challenge is battling the misconception that the authorities are against whatever the demonstration may be about.

"The subject matter of the demonstration is truly not of our concern," Mastin said.

Another challenge is balancing the rights of demonstrators against the rights of everyone else impacted by the act, such as nearby business owners on a street that has to be temporarily shut down because of the protest.

"Sometimes a demonstration may have a good cause or a good purpose, and they really want to draw attention, but they don't realize that some of the actions they do may actually cause contrary viewpoints to their cause just because of what they're doing," Mastin said.

Some of those who have marched, however, would disagree. Rita Chamblin, Bemidji liaison for Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light, took part in the Enbridge Line 3 demonstration in August. She said taking a message to the streets is a way to prompt people to seek out more information about the situation or ask questions they may not have otherwise thought to.

"That individual now knows something's important enough that people took the time and the effort and the risk to come do this," Chamblin said about the average passerby who may come into contact with a protest or demonstration. "And I think there were conversations that happened as a result of that."

#### Technology ramps up changes

Though activists have protested for generations, the volume on their megaphone has been turned up with the increase in technology. Rather than holding up a sign for a few passing cars to see, the sign was held up for millions of people to see on "The Rachel Maddow Show." Instead of being limited to those in downtown Bemidji, video footage of the Enbridge protest was streamed right to the office of Gov. Mark Dayton in St. Paul.

The terminology also varies and has changed. The march for Vernon May was named a "spiritual walk." The March for Aaron Krabbenhoft was called a "prayer march." Some say the word "protest" infers something negative. Others implied the word "demonstration" is outdated.

"I think of the word 'action' because you're taking some sort of action," Chamblin said.

While there has been a high concentration of demonstrations in recent months, they certainly aren't the first to descend on the streets of Bemidji. Most recently, Soren Sorensen helped spread the word about the demonstration supporting the Robert Mueller investigation. But he also can remember back to multiple protests from his years growing up in Bemidji.

"I would argue that there's kind of a long and rich tradition of protest in our area; I've seen it my whole life," Sorensen said.

Like Sorensen, Audrey Thayer has lived in the community for years and can point back to a number of protests she's seen and participated in. She said the largest she ever saw was in the early 2000s in response to the Iraq war. The second largest, she said, was the Women's March.

As a former employee of the American Civil Liberties Union, Thayer's been actively involved in issues of racial justice for years. Whether or not the community is energized enough to continue the trend of such visible activism, she's enjoyed watching and helping push issues into the public sphere.

"It's exciting," Thayer said. "It gives me hope that we move away from our kitchen tables of talk and we join as human beings on a common issue and take it to the streets."

CREDIT: By Jordan Shearer

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