

## Suspicious packages lead to downtown evacuation

By Anthony Welch

An estimated 300 residents and business owners were told to evacuate downtown Manitou Springs Thursday, after two suspicious packages were discovered at Lovers Lane and Lafayette Road around 1:20 p.m.

The Regional Explosives Unit, along with Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), were called in to assist the Manitou Springs Police and Fire Departments. An investigation and X-ray of the boxes led to the discovery of a hand grenade and other suspicious items including a knife and glass bottles that appeared to have liquid in them, according to the MSPD.



An x-ray of the one of the suspicious packages revealed a hand grenade inside. The grenade, it turns out, was inert. A knife was found in the other box.

The discovery led to a 1:43 p.m. evacuation of homes and business from Manitou Avenue and Pawnee Avenue to Manitou Avenue and

Navajo Avenue, Lovers Lane, Lafayette Road and Washington Avenue.

Streets were reopened, and residents were permitted to return to their homes around 9 p.m. after the Regional Explosive Unit rendered both packages safe. The grenade found was inert and had been deactivated, according to reports.

The owner of the boxes was discovered through items in the boxes which had his name and address, Smith told the Manitou Springs City Council at its meeting Tuesday night.

The person responsible for the boxes was moving and discarded the items in the boxes. He decided to leave these things at a crossroad near water because of his religious beliefs, Smith said.

Officers interviewed the man, who was not named, and he stated he meant no threat and the boxes weren't meant to be a hoax.

"The boxes were taped very suspiciously," Smith told Council.

"They were totally covered with tape, so you couldn't tell what was in them."

The MSPD will report the incident to the Colorado Springs Fourth Judicial District, Smith said, who'll decide whether to pursue charges against the man.

"The citizens, tourist and business owners were very cooperative," MSPD Chief Mary Jo Smith said. "We are aware that many people were inconvenienced during this incident. There were a few that were not happy, but our mission was for the safety of the citizens, tourists and business owners."

Residents were alerted via a reverse 911 call, and officials went door to door to make sure all were evacuated.

Black Cat Books owner Natalie Johnson just left a meeting at Venue 515 when she was alerted of the evacuation.

"I quickly realized that I was not able to get to my home, store, cats or car," she said. "I also noted that I had left my wallet and money in the store. My employee had both sets of keys and my car key."

Johnson didn't have a lot of options to keep her busy during the evacuation.

"I went to the Stagecoach holding the only two objects in my possession - a pad of paper and a pen," she said.

Smith said the department is reviewing how the situation was handled with the other agencies, but everyone was satisfied with how things went.

The MSPD would like to thank the other assisting agencies: The Regional Explosives Unit, Haz Mat, A.T.F., Colorado Springs Fire Department, Colorado Springs Police Department, El Paso County Sheriff's Department, AMR Ambulance, Advanced Life Support, Colorado Springs Utilities and the City of Manitou Springs' various departments.

*Jeanne Davant contributed to this story.*

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