

Security effort involves over 250 local people



A gas can left along the road in Millers Creek and parking issues at West Wilkes High School were apparently the most serious incidents encountered by personnel providing security for President Barack Obama's visit to West High Monday afternoon.

"There was a big sigh of relief from everyone involved" locally when the visit was over and it

was clear that everything went well, said Wilkes Sheriff Chris Shew.

Shew and others said federal officials praised everyone involved with security Monday in Wilkes for their professionalism and coordination.

Shew and other local officials held numerous planning meetings last week and this past weekend and maintained communication with U.S. Secret Service officials.

The efforts involved over 50 Wilkes Sheriff's Department officers, about 12 North Wilkesboro police officers, 23 Wilkesboro police officers, about 60 N.C. Highway Patrol troopers, over 100 local volunteer firefighters, other local personnel and an unidentified number of U.S. Secret Service agents stationed at or near West Wilkes and along roads traveled by Obama's 37-vehicle motorcade through Wilkes.

Gas can incident

Wilkes Sheriff's Department deputies noticed a gas can along Boone Trail on the southeastern side of the main intersection in Millers Creek on Monday and were told it had been there for several days, said Chief Deputy Doug Cotton of the sheriff's department.

Cotton said four Forsyth County Sheriff's Department bomb technicians already in Wilkes to assist with security removed the can, which was filled with gas, as a precaution. He said someone apparently had forgotten about the gas can and had no ill intent.

Shew said a few vehicles parked at West Wilkes had to be moved because they were parked too close to where Obama's motorcade was arriving. "We had enough time to get people to move their cars and one possibly had to be towed," said Shew.

Twelve to 15 people passed out from heat in the West Wilkes gym while waiting for Obama to speak. Wilkes Emergency Medical Services personnel treated them.

The thermostat was set at 55 degrees earlier Monday in anticipation of such problems, but filling the gym with people (standing and sitting) raised the temperature.

"We had several people call (Monday morning) and say they wanted to demonstrate" in support of different causes," said Shew. "I told them that they would have to do it on private property because there was no room left on school property."

Road closures

Most of the law enforcement officials, firefighters and others involved with security were posted where over 200 public and private roads and driveways intersected with roads traveled by the president's motorcade in Wilkes.

Personnel at intersections were told by radio to block access from intersecting roads and driveways when the motorcade was a certain distance away. Generally, side roads and driveways were blocked off when the motorcade was 30 minutes away and were reopened about 15 minutes after it passed.

Wilkesboro Police Chief Robert Bowlin said most of his officers, about 30 firefighters from the Wilkesboro, Moravian Falls and Broadway fire departments; five Wilkes Community College security officers; five Town of Wilkesboro street department employees; N.C. Department of Transportation employees and N.C. Highway Patrol troopers were dispatched to man the 78 intersecting public or private roads and driveways along Obama's route through Wilkesboro.

This force that included Wilkesboro officers were assigned to these intersections on U.S. 421 starting at the town limits and on N.C. 16 to Pleasant Grove Baptist Church when the motorcade arrived from Boone.

As the motorcade was leaving the county, they manned intersections starting at Pleasant Home Baptist Church and continuing on U.S. 421 to the eastern town limits. Only eastbound lanes of U.S. 421 were closed off after the motorcade left the commercial section in western Wilkesboro.

Traffic in the immediate vicinity of West Wilkes High School was limited by having people with tickets for the president's speech park at Millers Creek United Methodist Church, Millers Creek United Methodist's Wesley Center, Arbor Grove United Methodist Church and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. School activity buses then transported people to West High and back to the churches after the event.

Dr. Steve Laws, Wilkes school superintendent, said Millers Creek Baptist Church couldn't be used because Millers Creek Christian School didn't release students early Monday. West Wilkes High School and other schools in the West district released students at 1 p.m. Monday.

At West Wilkes

Cotton said Secret Service officials chose West Wilkes High School because it could be secured better and more easily than the other three Wilkes high schools, which were visited.

He said that with the access and the layout of West Wilkes, the president could be driven right up to a rear entrance of the school and thereby have very limited exposure. Cotton said the layout of West Wilkes affords a better view of the entire campus.

The sheriff's department set up a command post near a residence atop a hill across Boone Trail and within sight of the high school.

Cotton said rooms in the rear area of West Wilkes were designated for communication, as a bunker for the president if necessary and other special purposes. He said a location in the community was identified in advance as a safe place to take the president if necessary.

Cotton, who has worked on federal task forces and with federal authorities in other situations, said armed Secret Service agents were posted at various locations. He said some of the agents were dressed to blend in with the crowd and others were in positions that afforded good views.

About 45 minutes before the president arrived, a helicopter circled the West Wilkes High area and checked the ground below with special surveillance equipment. Cotton said this was partly to look for people in unusual places who might pose a threat.

He said two Air Force jets were up above also, beyond view with the naked eye, as a precaution in case of any threat from the air.

Although the president stopped at Mast Store on King Street in Boone to buy candy for Halloween, at a barbecue restaurant in Marion and a few other short visits on his three-day tour through North Carolina and Virginia, officials said West Wilkes High was his only stop in Wilkes. They said he ate barbecue from Tipton's Barbecue in Wilkesboro while here.

Shew, Laws, West Wilkes Principal Wayne Shepherd, Wilkes Fire Marshal Kevin Bounds, North Wilkesboro Mayor Robert Johnson and a few other state and local officials briefly met the president at West Wilkes. Some of them had family members with them.

Shew and Bounds were the only Wilkes County government officials who met the president.

During the Wilkes County commissioners meeting Tuesday night, Chairman Keith Elmore noted that the county commissioners were never officially notified that the president was coming.

Elmore said he believed correct protocol dictated otherwise and that the lack of advance notice might have been a matter of politics. All five of the Wilkes County commissioners are Republicans and Obama is a Democrat.