

Hoyt Park hunt for murder suspect Weber was 'all hands on deck'

Bill Novak
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So many officers descended on Hoyt Park to join in the search for murder suspect Steven Weber on Tuesday that Madison police spokesman Joel DeSpain lost count of the departments on the scene.

"That happens when you have an 'all hands on deck' situation," DeSpain said, a day following the intense manhunt in the west side park for Weber, 49, accused of shooting and killing his ex-wife Francesca Weber on Saturday night outside her Fitchburg apartment.

The manhunt ended abruptly shortly after 7 p.m. when Weber's body was discovered in the most rugged part of the park, an area of bluffs, cliffs and caves.

The Dane County Coroner's office released its preliminary autopsy report at noon Wednesday, saying Weber died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Several dozen officers came to the scene, many in camouflage SWAT team gear, including officers from Fitchburg, Madison, the Dane County Sheriff's Office, the University of Wisconsin-Madison police, the FBI, the ATF, U.S. Marshals and even Mount Horeb.

A helicopter flew overhead, up from Illinois courtesy of the Law Enforcement Aviation Coalition, which supports law enforcement agencies in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin who need air surveillance or rescue.

Capital City Church, 401 N. Blackhawk Ave., offered its facility for use as a command center, which made for a rather surreal scene.

"We had 15 people in the sanctuary of the church, many dressed in camouflage, toting rifles," DeSpain said.

SWAT teams from the sheriff's department and the Madison police department were in the woods and on the grounds of the park, looking for Weber.

Paramedics from the Madison Fire Department were on the SWAT teams.

"We now have a medical component on SWAT teams," DeSpain said. "If anyone (on a team) gets shot, we can do immediate field surgery."

Police didn't know what they might be dealing with when the calls first came in mid-morning.

Weber's black Chevy pickup truck was found parked on Bluff Street, the northern border of the 27-acre park.

"We had a couple of calls," DeSpain said. "One citizen sees the parked vehicle and thinks it could be the murder suspect's truck, and another person called in after seeing what could be the suspect walking into Hoyt Park, carrying several objects."

The response to the calls was dramatic and quick, mainly because of the potential for violence from Weber.

He made statements to a Verona bartender last week that he was "going to go on a shooting rampage and was going to kill his ex-wife," according to search warrants filed Monday.

Weber grew up in the Hoyt Park area, so he knew the ins and outs of the park.

A murder suspect, possibly armed, heading into a popular residential city park with several schools nearby made for a tactical response akin to firefighters responding to a five-alarm fire.

"What caused the level of response were the threatening statements made, the potential hiding places in the park, the possibility he was either going to kill himself, commit 'suicide by cop' (acting in such a way to cause an officer to fire), harm someone else or getting into someone's home in the neighborhood," DeSpain said.

The search for Weber started out in the easiest areas of Hoyt Park, and progressed to the toughest terrain last.

"We wanted to search the entire park before nightfall," DeSpain said.

Weber's body was found before nightfall at the far west end of the park, in the toughest terrain. It wasn't known when he shot himself, but the autopsy report could shed light on it.

Residents in the area north of the park were kept out of the neighborhood by officers standing guard at intersections. The residents were told what was going on, and those already in their homes in the neighborhood were called through the Reverse 911 system, advising them of the situation.

One woman who lives in the area gave a handwritten letter to DeSpain Wednesday morning, thanking the department for the way the situation was handled.

"I live in the 3300 block of Harvey Street," DeSpain read from the letter. "There were numerous police barricades, but all officers were polite and gave me options for my return home.

"Their concern for my safety was amazing," DeSpain continued from the letter. "Thank you for helping keep the peace every day."

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