



Supporters of Gitxsan rail blockade question cancellation of GoFundMe campaign

Fundraising giant claimed campaign for 'landback mobile command centre' violated terms

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The organizer of a fundraising effort to build an "organizing hub" to assist supporters of a northern B.C. rail blockade is questioning a decision by GoFundMe to cancel the campaign before it even hit the internet.

Git'luuhl'um'hetxwit house member Kolin Sutherland-Wilson says the fundraising platform wrote Thursday to say it had removed the campaign to build a "landback mobile command centre" he had been working for months to launch.

GoFundMe didn't provide an exact reason, claiming only that the conduct of the fundraiser "falls under our 'Prohibited conduct' section."

Sutherland-Wilson says the structure was intended as a distribution point for food, supplies and educational material that could be towed around to Gitxsan villages — not a device used to impede railway traffic.

That's left him wondering if Indigenous activists will suffer the fallout from the American crowdfunding giant's recent decision to stop payments to the organizers of protests against vaccine mandates.

"Given everything that's happening with GoFundMe and the convoy movement, I think we're basically thinking that GoFundMe is pretty much going to be worried about Canadian law

cracking down on them in regards to any protests, whether that's Indigenous, vaccine or what have you," Sutherland-Wilson told the CBC.

"I just think the recent events are going to make it harder for Indigenous grass roots."

'A more permanent and secure longhouse'

GoFundMe has yet to respond to an email from the CBC asking about the situation.

The company's terms and conditions include a long list of causes the company won't allow to be promoted on its site, ranging from the outright violation of laws to the sale of drugs and the legal defence of alleged crimes associated with hate or violence.

Gitksan members blocked Canadian National Railway lines in February 2020 in sympathy with protesters who were seeking to stop the construction of a Coastal GasLink pipeline on Wetsuwet'en traditional territory about 130 km away.

RCMP arrested three hereditary Gitksan chiefs and nine other people for violating an injunction. Last month, CN Rail announced it would not pursue contempt charges against them.

Sutherland-Wilson provided a draft copy of the campaign the group were hoping to launch through GoFundMe.

"We're asking for your help to upgrade our operations centre and expand our community organizing efforts," the plea for money states.

"We need to build a more permanent and secure longhouse structure that can house essential services and serve as an organizing hub."

The proposed campaign says the money will be spent on "building materials, a modest solar system, indoor air filtration, a water tank, kitchen supplies and rented outhouses."

It also provides "background" to the conflict that includes a description of the February 2020 arrests and mentions of the ongoing injunction held by CN Rail and an RCMP raid last November against Wet'suwet'en pipeline protesters.

"We will never let them take our land," the would-be campaign concludes.

Hot button issues 'trip' anxiety

Washington-based Cato Institute analyst Will Duffield has written about the difficulties crowdfunding sites like GoFundMe face in navigating around hot button issues.

In 2020, the site removed a campaign to raise money for the legal defence of Kyle Rittenhouse, a teenager who was recently found not guilty of homicide and reckless endangerment for killing two men, and wounding another during a night of protests in Wisconsin over the killing of a Black man by a white police officer.

According to Duffield, the site was embroiled in controversy in 2015 over fundraisers to raise money in defence of bakeries that refused to provide cakes for gay weddings.

GoFundMe went on to ban campaigns in "defence or support of anyone alleged to be involved in criminal activity" — but has since amended that prohibition by citing specific types of crimes, including anything involving hate, intolerance, gender discrimination, financial crimes or crimes of deception.

Duffield says GoFundMe takes a "2,000-foot level" view of the hundreds of thousands of fundraisers pitched every year and does not have the time to delve deep into the context of all of them.

"I suspect that in this case, given the political salience of the truckers' convoy and everything going on in Ottawa, the fact that it was a 'mobile' command centre probably tripped some anxiety," he said.

"Particularly as GoFundMe, an American firm, scrambles to figure out and interpret this emergency economic measures order and how it applies to them in regards to what content — I can imagine them in light of that taking a novelly restrictive approach to fundraisers in Canada."

Duffield said GoFundMe's reticence to promote controversial fundraisers has led people to other platforms, but many of those don't have the resources to protect against hackers — leading to the kind of data leak that happened with donations through an alternate setup to assist the truckers.

Sutherland-Wilson says they will get the command centre built one way or another.

"No doubt we're going to fundraise along other lines," he said.