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## Council not acting wisely

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*ARGUS-COURIER COLUMNIST*

*Published: Thursday, June 25, 2009 at 3:00 a.m.*

It has been said that the wisest use of power is to use it sparingly. If that be the case, our City Council is not acting very wisely.

The current majority of four who have been aggressively consolidating their control over city government since January have finally taken the extraordinary move of closing down the committee that reviews site plans and architectural details, and firing the entire Planning Commission in order to reappoint six members of the majority's choosing.

There are plenty of reasons why this is a truly bad decision, most of them having to do with the integrity of planning, but we won't go into those reasons here.

The biggest cause for true alarm is that it is an unprecedented attack on a system of local government that has served this community well for decades, and is being done under an umbrella of questionable legality.

According to our municipal code, it takes five votes to fire a planning commissioner. The majority — Torliatt, Glass, Barrett and Renée — has determined that the code doesn't apply to them if they just fire everybody. The vote on the council to take this remarkable step was a hotly debated 4-3, with one minority member calling it a "naked power grab."

The move to consolidate power began earlier this year with the decision to limit the authority of the Planning Commission and make the council the final authority on major development projects. The concerns of the majority have to do with the Target shopping center and the Lowe's shopping center in particular. None of the four have said a kind word about these projects in recent months.

The real danger in what the council is doing is that they are limiting dissent, and dissent is the heart and soul of the democratic process. Dissent can shine the light of reality on bad ideas, and conversely, it can make good ideas even better by revealing quirks. Rubber stamp me-tooism, on the other hand, can be a recipe for really bad

government.

Our council majority, of course, is hotly denying that there is any intent to do anything more than to streamline the process of government, although details on how this proposal will accomplish this are sketchy in the extreme. Regarding abolishing the Site Plan and Architectural Review Committee, there have been no studies, no community meetings, no workshops to create the kind of evidence that this is a better way to go.

Regarding firing the Planning Commission, it would take a Karl Rove to come up with the kind of spin that said this made sense as a process of "streamlining."

In fact, one member of the majority, Teresa Barrett, sent an e-mail to potential Planning Commission applicants saying that she considered this move an "interim step" to a "better two-body system." By implication this two-body system would mean returning to Planning Commission/SPARC with different appointees than we have now. Any other changes could have been implemented without dissolving the two bodies.

The current majority has distinguished themselves with a prickly aversion to criticism of most any kind, and they take turns writing rebuttals to any number of real and imagined questioning of their judgment. Your cheerful columnist has been ripped royally, by council members and in the letters to the editor column, and may well get pounded into the sand for today's missive.

But that is the nature of political discourse. Our leaders are not supposed to be perfect, to be above criticism, just as our writers of opinion should never consider themselves the ultimate voice of wisdom. But we voice our opinions, we try to inform, we try to further the democratic process with the airing of dissenting points of view.

Stifling dissent never has, and never will, advance the democratic process. Stifling dissent, however, can lead to dictatorial governance.

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