

[back to article](#)



## Argus-Courier Editorial

# Politics tainting planning process

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

The new City Council majority's recent decision to summarily fire Petaluma's planning commissioners and members of the Site Plan and Architectural Review Committee and create a single new body charged with performing their combined duties was ostensibly done to "streamline, expedite and enhance" the processing of building and development applications.

In reality, it will likely achieve just the opposite effect, and could easily wind up making the current procedural logjams at City Hall look like the good old days.

The development approval process in Petaluma is broken, and has been worsened by the city's recent decision to eliminate its planning and community development department. Without a planning department and a clear and efficient process to handle building applications, it is impossible for the city to achieve the goals outlined in its new General Plan regarding job creation, housing and business development.

Rather than fix the problem, this latest decree will almost certainly lead to further delays in approving projects, fewer opportunities for public review and comment, more protracted and less productive public hearings, increased potential for lawsuits, reduced emphasis on historical preservation and the potential loss of all remaining institutional knowledge about local planning issues, making a full-blown train wreck of Petaluma's problematic development review process.

Depending on who the council chooses to occupy seats on a reconstituted planning commission, the knowledgeable and experienced professionals currently serving on the two boards could all be replaced by less qualified people whose principal quality is their political allegiance to the City Council's new majority composed of council members Teresa Barrett, David Glass, Tiffany Renée and Mayor Pam Torliatt. In addition to sending a troubling message that talented and competent public service is subordinate to politics, the appointment of ideologically compatible people would further politicize the development approval process.

It doesn't have to be this way. Following nearly two years of work, the Development Code Advisory Committee recently presented the City Council with their first set of intelligent and sensible recommendations on how to streamline the city's development approval process. Although their work was never completed, DCAC volunteers worked long hours to research best practices in other municipalities to devise an improved process. Unfortunately, most of the critical recommendations they made were either ignored or glossed over by majority council members who suddenly directed city staffers to consolidate the Planning Commission and SPARC.

It's unclear exactly where this ill-conceived yet very major procedural change originated, but its long-term impacts have not been properly analyzed and there appear to be few if any fiscal or procedural benefits to recommend it. Aside from the thousands of dollars in legal fees to draft the necessary legislation, there will be "negligible" financial impacts, according to the staff report.

From a public planning standpoint, the abolishment of SPARC would represent a 30-year step backwards for Petaluma. Decades ago, most cities in California created design review boards so their planning commissions could focus more effectively on land-use issues while appointees knowledgeable about architecture, design and landscaping could thoroughly evaluate other aspects of a proposed development. The change gave the public more input into development projects and enabled appointed commissioners a better opportunity to ensure that the letter and spirit of general plans, zoning laws and design standards were realized.

Especially with the city poised to select a new outside firm to perform all planning services, a decision to blow up the two existing review boards and appoint people with completely different skill sets to a new board charged with reviewing widely divergent issues can only make the development approval process more cumbersome.

A final vote on the matter is slated for July 6. Given the proposal's severe shortcomings and the fact that the public has been mostly shut out of the very hasty process leading up to the initial vote, the council should reject this proposition, reassemble the DCAC and provide them with adequate time to research and recommend alternate options that are truly aimed at streamlining the development approval process. That would be a far more productive, democratic and inclusive approach to solving the problem at hand.

If the council majority decides instead to rush ahead with their dubious scheme, they will add fuel to a growing public perception that they are enhancing their power to stop certain allowable development projects, not on their merits and compatibility with General Plan and zoning laws, but by creating a totally dysfunctional development approval process.

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