The Bonneville scene

Controversial zoning board faces revamping

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The time appears ripe soon for drastic surgery on the controversial Bonneville Planning and Zoning Commission, headed by its fiery chairman, Richard Skidmore.

A new Bonneville County Board of Commissioners, which appears to have cut ties with its abrasive past and embarked on a new course for more openness in government and lending a more sympathetic ear to the public, bodes well for the future.

This is coupled with the fact that the terms of seven of the members of the committee will expire June 1. It will give the county commissioners an excellent opportunity to virtually abolish the present membership and start fresh.

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The present members of the planning and zoning commission must be given credit for sacrificing time and money for a thankless task in considering zoning matters which in many cases are highly controversial and emotional.

There is little question they have sought to be sincere and earnest in their duties, and for this they must be commended.

However, all too often, there appear to have been many controversies. The commission chairman, Richard Skidmore, has been embroiled in exchanges which have raised questions on the commission's detachment. Skidmore, a building developer, can confront conflict of interest questions on a number of zoning matters.

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The blackest eye the commission received was the surreptitious reduction last summer of the commission from 12 to nine in a thinly disguised move to lop off two independent voices on the commission, Mrs. Brian (Lynn) Smith, housewife and credit union employee, and Delbert Winterfield, Swan Valley rancher.

The leader of this movement, Artell Suitter, former Bonneville County Commissioner chairman, blandly explained the reduction was intended to make the smaller commission more workable. As the terms of Mrs. Smith and Winterfeld expired last June, it was convenient to drop them. The third position was vacant at the time.

Mrs. Smith and Winterfeld charged with justification it was a ploy to eliminate them from the commission. It was one of a number of reasons why Suitter was defeated. In fact, Mrs. Smith was one of the chief campaign workers for Tom Loertscher, young Bone rancher, who handily defeated Suitter in the primary and later went on to win the general election.

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New commission chairman Clyde A. Burtenshaw and Loertscher say they have not discussed appointments or reappointments on the zoning commission, but they are aware the terms of most members expire June 1.

The terms expire June 1 of the chairman, Richard Skidmore; the vice chairman, Robert Hoff, Martin Benham, Gordon Moir, Ralph Steele, Ruby Sharp, and Peggy Strain. The holdovers until the following year, June 1, 1980, are Hermen Sargenta and Marion Orme.

Burtenshaw said it appears that when the present commission was named, that all were appointed for three year terms and thus their terms expire simultaneously.

He suggested that when the new appointments are made there should be drawings to name two for one year term, three for three years and three for two years. Under this staggered program, ther terms of three would expire each year.

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In view of the past controversies surrounding Skidmore, it might also be a good practice to avoid naming a chairman who is closely identified with the building and real estate trade, to avoid conflict of interest. Perhaps representatives of the industry can be named on the commission to give some expert advice, but this advice can be obtained without serving on the board.

Another suggestion is appointment of an attorney who can properly interpret the zoning ordinances and regulations.

All too often, the county building inspector, Max Brinton, himself a controversial official, has made these interpretations.

In this connection the new board might give a closer look to the way Brinton has conducted his office.

County Commissioners Leo Clawson and Art Detrick drafted restrictive regulations early in 1976 after they felt Brinton was not following proper procedures in his relations with the Bonneville County Council of Governments. They never fully enforced them, and after their defeat later in the year, they were ignored by the board and Brinton. In the past two years, Brinton has had close ties with Suitter in supposedly carrying out his duties, often not reflecting sound long range land use planning.