The Bonneville scene . . .

Skidmore appointment offers election issue

The Post-Register

The political pulse

C-6 Idaho Falls, Idaho, Wednesday, July 11, 1979

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The reappointment of the controversial Richard Skidmore to the Bonneville County Planning Commission furnishes the same issue which dominated the 1978 election for the 1980 campaign.

Plaudits must go to Republican County Commissioner Tom Loetscher for voting against the reappointment and thus filfilling one of his three campaign pledges.

The Democratic commission chairman, Clyde A. Burtenshaw, who generally had conducted the county business in a creditable manner, now becomes a target for 1980. The other county commissioners, A. Wylie Snarr, holds over until 1982, and his vote on the issue follows his patterns of following the majority.

The reappointment of the other incumbent planning commission member, Martin Benham, must be highly commended, in view of his past record of frequently voting the opposite of Skidmore in controversial matters.

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Burtenshaw made no campaign pledges regarding the planning commission and thus was certainly free to vote his own convictions. He was viewed in such high favor that the other two Republican members, Loertscher and Snarr, agreed to his election as chairman even though in the minority as a Democrat. This is the first time this has happened in Bonneville County, and possibly one of the few times in Idaho history.

Loertscher's other campaign pledge, to restore the commission membership to 12 from nine and to give a voting voice to Swan Valley may be partially met. Loertscher's suggestion for a new chairman is excellent.

The board has agreed to increase the membership to 10 and to designate the additional member to represent Swan Valley. This appears a reasonable step.

The third campaign pledge of Loertscher, to designate a convenient evening meeting to which the public is invited, appears still on the back burner. It may be the demand for this is not compelling, but it warrants a trial a least.

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Loertscher touched on the key point when he explained his vote against Skidmore, a builder, was based on Skidmore's conflict of interest, a frequent issue in past zoning decisions.

Burtenshaw's statements, by contrast, appear woefully weak. He said Skidmore was an excellent planner. This is likely true, but his planning was all too often on the side of the developer, rather than following an even balance, such as Benham, Marion Orme, Peggy Strain, Ruby Sharp and most other members of the commission have done. They should be commended for their dedication in performing a public duty.

It would appear that Burtenshaw could have avoided considerable future trouble for himself and the county government by making a change at this time. After all, Skidmore has served 11 years, which should be enough for any board member.

Unfortunately, it appears the former defeated commissioner, Artell Suitter, influenced both Burtenshaw, who should know better, and Snarr. Suitter spoke strongly in behalf of Skidmore, one of the very issues which ironically helped bring about Suitter's defeat by Loertscher in the 1978 primary. Suitter has now forced this same issue down Burtenshaw's throat, with Snarr in concurrence.

It's also painfully noticeable that several construction firms, who can't help but have selfish interest in land development, warmly backed Skidmore.

Lucretia Chew, president of the Idaho Falls League of Women Voters, noted the Local Planning Act of 1975 says conflicts of interest on planning boards are prohibited. Perhaps, more may be heard on this, if some individual or group cares to make a court test case.

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There has been altogether too much controversy surrounding the planning commission and the building inspector, W. Max Brinton, which would indicate something is wrong. This would have been an excellent opportunity to clear the air.

There were a number of excellent applicants for the position who could have replaced Skidmore. It would appear others should be given a chance to perform and offer fresh ideas.

The county also has an excellent professional planner, Charles Borup, who has upgraded the county's complex zoning program.

The county commissioners have a difficult chore to perform, particularly in view of the meager $12,000 a year they get for a job which now is becoming almost full time.

Yet, many commissioners consistently blatantly ignore the wishes of the people on salient issues. As a result, Suitter was ousted in 1978, Art Detrich and Leo Clawson in 1976, Orval Forbes in 1974, and many others before on just such matters.

Burtenshaw now faces the same peril for 1980, while Loertscher conversely, has enhanced his standing with the county electorate.