

The PC Whistle

By Rhona Baron

The Planning Commission (PC) is a crucial group in any town. PCs deal with codes around land use and legislative policy, as well as comprehensive and long range planning. It's a complex and challenging mix, most effective when membership includes qualified residents who represent a broad range of needs and interests. Today we are blowing the whistle on Leavenworth's PC, their single note viewpoint and the process by which residents land in those influential seats.

In Leavenworth, the *"mayor appoints and council approves"* each Commissioner. Our process is unlike Seattle, for instance, where half of the PC is approved by council and half by mayor. Our wording around appointment, while not atypical, is unlike other small, successful towns that encourage discussion before the council votes. Because of the brevity of Leavenworth's guidance around *"the council approves,"* I learned the hard way that our council refuses to discuss or engage in the appointment process.

Several months ago, when Mayor Florea was set to appoint Drew Foulk, one of two candidates at the time, I sent a two page, well documented email laying out the history and qualifications of both candidates. Concerned about the choice of Mr Foulk, a beverage professional based in Seattle and working remotely from his new home in Leavenworth's UGA, I favored the second candidate. She was an established resident and member of the local workforce who would have provided needed diversity in her approach to neighborhood development. I referenced the city's own language about membership in the PC: *"The Planning Commission is intended to represent the diverse interests and backgrounds of the community."* I pleaded with the mayor to think twice and with the council to at least discuss the second candidate's superior qualifications. Unlike Mr Foulk, the second candidate had attended every PC and council meeting for the previous year and half and was beyond reproach in her intelligence, ability to communicate thoughtfully and see all sides of an issue before weighing in.

Zero discussion was forthcoming. The appointment of Mr Foulk passed quickly and without comment at the next Council session. In fact, I was told by one council member that *"It would not be appropriate to interfere with the mayor's appointment process."* While a second council member replied: *"It is the mayor's prerogative and role to appoint the members of the Planning Commission."*

Do you think they interpreted the appointment process correctly by sitting on their hands, except when pulling them out to rubber stamp? Do you suspect they refused to discuss because diversity and qualifications for this complex assignment were less important than an overarching agenda? Can you guess what that agenda was?

The mayor emailed regarding his appointment stating that Mr. Fouk was *"the one who would best move us forward in providing more housing options..."* Make no mistake; housing options are good. But "housing options" thus far seem to feature densifying neighborhoods for units that have not proved affordable and are vastly unpopular with

neighbors. Additionally, housing is hardly the sole purpose of the PC! It's a big, important job with many tentacles. We need diverse people to wrap their heads and hearts around the issues. The mayor is choosing to abdicate responsibility for the big picture while appropriating our community's Planning Commission to satisfy his political notions.

Comments from residents continue to come into our Website portal: *"In a Planning Commission zoom meeting a while back regarding lot size, set backs and building height considerations, it became very obvious that several of the hand picked commission members are extremely agenda driven...."* The Whistle agrees. We are simply requesting balance.

We'd also like the council to do their job by discussing appointments then voting accordingly. If the current wording *"mayor appoints and council approves"* is a paper bag the council refuses to punch through to embrace their own agency, The Whistle recommends adopting language like this from Springdale Utah, a gateway town known for it's high quality, community inspired housing policies. *"All members shall be appointed by the mayor **with the advice and consent** of the town council."*

The Whistle's blowing as this column again requests balance, fairness and putting the whole community first, not just those tied to the mayor and individual council members vision of neighborhood density. There are many important decisions and long range strategies tasked to the Planning Commission. Leavenworth needs a more comprehensive, altruistic and diverse group. Take our surveys in the Echo and visit us at LWhistle.com. Or just Whistle. We'll hear you.