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Maintaining decorum

Some residents object to Anacortes mayor's methods

By **WHITNEY PIPKIN** Staff Writer

ANACORTES — After a string of emotionally charged City Council meetings, some residents have taken issue with the mayor's methods for maintaining decorum.

At meetings over the past month, Mayor Dean Maxwell has called down some members of the audience for holding up signs, laughing, clapping or nodding in approval of comments. As mayor, it's his job to keep the meetings running smoothly, but some have disagreed with his tendency to silence any and all disruptions.

Noticing the frustrations, Council member Eric Johnson posted "a mini-term paper" on the subject on his blog this week, citing the state and local laws that guide how meetings should be conducted.

"There's plenty of opportunity for the free expression, it's just that in order that city council meetings don't go on until the wee hours of the morning, the mayor feels that he needs to exercise proper control of it. There may be other views on that and I'm getting some feedback," Johnson said of his blog post, which the mayor and other council members know about.

The law gives the mayor "the sole discretion to preserve order" and distinguishes between other public forum settings and that of city council chambers. Still, Johnson's post had garnered a handful of comments by week's end, with many citing incidents at recent council meetings.

At a packed hearing on Sept. 26 about whether the city should extend its controversial contract with a proposed bottling plant, the mayor asked a man to take down a sign he was holding that opposed the project "or leave." The man argued, but acquiesced.

At the same meeting, Maxwell told members of the audience three times that they were not allowed to clap after public comments.

"There are elements of risk if you don't conduct a meeting that's appropriate. The worst-case scenario for me is to have a meeting degenerate into a brawl," Maxwell said. "I take it very seriously."

The mayor said he took this part even more seriously when the council took on a quasi-judicial role in making a recent land-use decision.

After a long hearing that sprawled over three public meetings this month, the council voted to approve a conditional-use permit for a 24-bedroom facility called Memory Care Center. The council added conditions that the developer build a sidewalk and reduce other impacts of the project, which garnered six appeals during the approval process.

In this setting, the council is supposed to make its decision based on evidence that's in the record, not on public expressions of opinion, Councilman Brian Geer said.

That's why he thinks the mayor was in line when he called out an audience member for laughing during one portion of the hearing and another for silently shaking his head while a council member was speaking.

"For the most part I support the way Mayor Maxwell conducts meetings," Geer said. "We aren't supposed to listen to people on a landuse issue. We become judicial; we base our decision on what's in the record."

Ryan Walters, who's currently running unopposed for an open seat on the council, said he didn't see some of the actions the mayor objected to as disrupting the meetings. He said the mayor's tendency to call out audience members has made for a tense environment at the meetings that possibly discourages public participation.

"I've certainly heard complaints from a lot of people about it. I do think that the room feels tense," he said. "People have trouble with public speaking to begin with and the City Council should make them feel comfortable and welcome."