

perspective

BOCC needs to revamp public comment period

By George Yount Port Townsend

To the Board of County Commissioners:

I would like to encourage the Board of County Commissioners to consider suspending the comment period and to deliberate how to make it more effective in 2011.

The comment period's purpose to allow citizens to express their views on issues of relevance to Jefferson County is laudable. However, citizens are actually discouraged from attending and participating because the comment period has earned a reputation that it is the forum for a small group of individuals who have issues with the current governance. The record shows that the minutes used by these individuals equals five months of the allotted time for testimony.

There is consistent evidence of bullying attacks on private citizens and commissioners alike; Mr. Belenski's testimony on Aug. 23, 2010 is an example. This has degraded the comment period to, as Mr. Tracy noted, "theater."

On Aug. 25, 2010, Judge S. Brooke Taylor denied Mr. Mike Belenski his motion to reconsider regarding his legal challenge to the conduct of the Monday morning comment period. Judge Taylor ruled the comment period is not a public hearing or a town hall forum. The comment period during BOCC regular business meeting is "optional." Granting time for public comment is not required. It is entirely discretionary.

Judge Taylor further ruled that the chairman of the commission is entitled to exercise his discretion in order to make sure speakers are talking about something that is on the agenda, and that "time, place and manner" restrictions are not being violated. The chair of the meeting is accorded considerable discretion in this regard, and courts will not substitute their judgment

for that of the person running the meeting.

Putting the comment period on hold for re-evaluation does not mean BOCC communication would cease. On the contrary, there are numerous ways people can make their views known to the commissioners:

- Make an appointment.
- Call on the phone.
- Write an email.
- Write a postal letter.
- Send a fax.
- Text a message to their cell phone.
- Attend a community outreach BOCC meeting.
- Participate in numerous volunteer groups, such as the planning commission, WRIA 17, Jefferson Transit Authority Citizens Advisory Committee or Jefferson County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, where the Board of County Commissioners frequently attend.
- Talk to a commissioner at the Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce meetings.
- Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper.

Here are some points I would recommend you consider:

- Does every Monday need to have a public comment period?
- Could time from 9 to 9:30 a.m. be used for citizens to meet with the commissioner from their district?
- Similar to the decorum in a court of law, the board should define the procedure for testifying: Approach the podium; give your full name and address; and, if possible, provide written testimony.
- Moving of furniture or equipment is the discretion of the chair.

The Board of County Commissioners needs to exercise due diligence to effectively utilize your time in governing Jefferson County. Now is a good time to reformulate the comment period to reflect issues of time, place and manner. I look forward to your deliberations on this matter.