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OPINION

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Dunes City officials seek to dismantle CCIs

GUEST VIEWPOINT

By CAMERON LA FOLLETTE, LAND USE DIRECTOR, Oregon Coast Alliance

Dunes City council is attacking the city's public involvement process.

State law requires that every city and county have a process to involve the public in land use decisions. Many places just appoint their planning commissions for that purpose, but not so in Dunes City. It has a Citizen Involvement Committee (CCI) that includes City Council, planning commission and citizens. Citizens become members of the CCI just by attending, and can vote at the meetings they attend.

The CCI in Dunes City has two functions: to work out the best process for hearing public concerns, and to actually hear those concerns.

Other communities separate the two and create temporary Citizen Advisory Committees to hear public input in a more direct way than, for example, testifying at a planning commission hearing.

In Dunes City, both functions required under state law are rolled into one. This town hall approach suits Dunes City very well, and has ensured that the Comprehensive Plan and ordinance changes really reflect citizen wishes.

But the city council wants to eliminate comp plan policies that require strong septic measures, as various members have made clear in public statements over the last several years. What better way to start than muzzling the citizens who fight so hard for septic protections?

City council appoints the planning commission, which recently held a hearing on a council-inspired proposal to appoint the planning commission as the CCI. They recommended approval, as was expected. ORCA submitted testimony pointing out that this proposal appears to be an indirect attack on the septic ordinance, especially as it would decrease, rather than increase, the public involvement state law requires. Many Dunes City residents protested strongly against this proposal at the hearing, describing the long crusade by city officials to escape mandatory septic require-

ments and energetic public involvement.

The Summer 2013 Dunes City newsletter added its own confusion by inaccurately stating that to actually hear what citizens have to say about land use planning, Dunes City must have a Citizens Advisory Committee; and since Dunes City doesn't have one, it therefore has no means to allow citizen input as required by state law.

This is simply wrong. The current double-function CCI is a perfect structure for providing admirable amounts of public input on important issues.

Concerned residents drafted a proposed ordinance to codify and clarify the CCI as it now exists. They presented it at the planning commission hearing, but the commission didn't even consider it. This is not the way to collaborate with Dunes City residents to increase and encourage public involvement.

ORCA recommends that city council and the planning commission step back and work with the town's residents to genuinely encourage people's participation.

The current city council proposal appears to have an underlying agenda of controlling public involvement, which is all too familiar. Let us remember that Woahink Lake, which benefits so much from the mandatory septic requirements, is the drinking water source not only for many Dunes City residents, but also for Honeyman State Park, which hosts more than 1.5 million visitors per year.

Dunes City thus has a tremendous, far-reaching responsibility to protect the lake's water quality. Any and all vigorous public involvement that will lead to increased water quality protection is clearly essential. ORCA encourages city council to take up its investigation of public involvement policies in this light.

Dunes City council will hold a hearing on the proposal to appoint the planning commission as the CCI on Aug. 8 and Dunes City Hall. Time has not been announced yet, but please call Dunes City for further information, 541-997-3338.