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Proposed planning changes raise concerns

By **KATE MARTIN** Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Some people say Skagit County's proposed changes to its planning commission are part of an international plot to control nearly every aspect of our lives.

About two dozen people attended a public hearing Tuesday on the proposed changes.

One of those changes would stagger planning commissioner terms more evenly, while another would require annual training for commissioners on how to run public meetings and on land-use law.

But some people said the proposed ordinance, which would dissolve and reform the planning commission, would give professional land-use planners too much power.

Paul Taylor criticized the adoption of the Growth Management Act in 1990, which he said restricts what private property owners can do with their lands in the name of salmon protection, habitat restoration and flood mitigation — all of which he said have not been achieved. He said he was told if he wants to do anything with his land, he would have to check with the county planning department first.

"If that doesn't cause you to pause and send shivers down your spine, then I suggest you have forgotten the principles upon which our country was founded," Taylor said.

Others said the changes were part of an alleged Orwellian plot led by the United Nations to relocate rural residents into a city-dwelling existence, called Agenda 21.

"Whose idea was this ordinance?" asked Ed Stauffer. "Look up sustainability on the Internet. ... I'm not going to talk to you about what I found because I don't want to be the guy wearing the tin hat. ... I want you to look up Agenda 21 from the United Nations."

Most of the comments seemed to be off-topic, said Skagit County Civil Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Ryan Walters.

"I thought that we had a very interesting public hearing on some proposal," Walters said. "I just don't think it was this one."

Residents commented on the changes for more than an hour.

Two sitting planning commission members took the Skagit County commissioners to task for not giving the citizen group enough time to review proposals before them during a Tuesday morning hearing outlining the changes.

The proposal says it will keep the number of planning commission members but change the terms to three years from four, and would reset the dates on which current commission members' terms expire.

Planning Commission member Annie Lohman cited specific changes she found problematic in the proposal, including what she said was overly broad language meant to prevent conflicts of interest. Walters said in changing commission member terms, each county commissioner would appoint one person to the citizen board each year.

As it stands, four people's terms expire this year.

"I'm a farmer and I wonder if the way this is worded, if I would be exempted from the decision if I could not rule on the agricultural code," Lohman said.

Skagit County commissioners voted to extend the comment period of the proposed ordinance for two weeks.

Go online

For more information about the proposed ordinance, log on to www.skagitcounty.net, click on the item about "proposed changes to the Planning Commission and land use legislative process."