

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Council ignores law on public meetings

"The public doesn't need to know," seems to be the message sent by the Vernonia City Council on March 6th.

Vernonia Mayor Art Parrow called an executive session following the March 6 public meeting to consider "reprimand of a police officer" and "potential litigation," then used the closed door meeting to characterize the citizens who made public complaints about the police department as unworthy of consideration.

The process also meant that Chief of Police Jim Walters defended the criticism of his department in private, not in public as the citizens had done. There was little of a confidential nature in Walters comments and he did a good job. Both he and his department would have been better served if his response had been public.

The INDEPENDENT would not be commenting on anything that happened in the executive session except that the mayor and the two council members present violated the public meetings law by making an official decision behind closed doors...agreeing to support the department by writing a letter for publication. There is nothing wrong with the support. What is wrong is violating both the spirit and the letter of the open meetings law by *voting* on a position in a closed meeting instead of limiting themselves to discussion, then recording a vote in public meeting.

Both Mayor Parrow and Councilor Leonetti have been involved in local government too long to be ignorant of the law. Ball is fairly new, but needs to think for herself and not just follow that conveniently slippery slope. Since our elected officials ignore the law, it is time for City staff to speak up and "help" the council remember that limits also apply to them.

Decisions and meetings

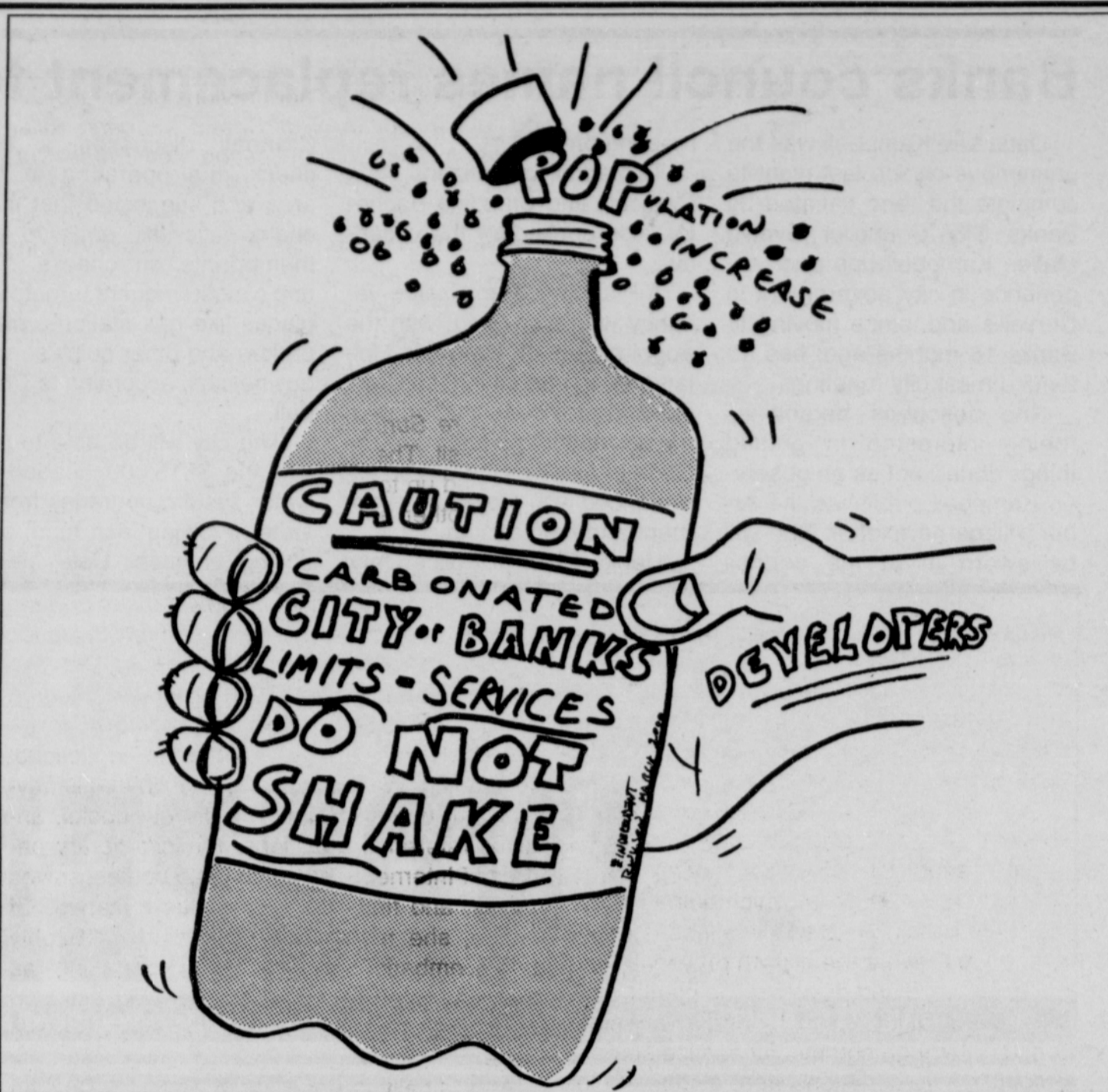
Jack Peterson, chair of the Columbia County Board of Commissioners, couldn't explain how or when the board made the decision not to meet with Vernonia citizens about the linear trail extension. Previously, Commissioner Rita Bernhard said it was just a mutual agreement, they never discussed it in a meeting.

The INDEPENDENT asked the question because a Friday meeting in Vernonia was aborted by an accident that prevented Peterson and Bernhard from getting here in time. The following Monday, Bernhard said the board agreed they would not set another date for the meeting...but there was no official meeting between that Friday afternoon and Monday.

Obviously, they made a decision, but it certainly wasn't in public.

At the March 6 meeting of the Vernonia council, when asked again about the decision, Bernhard explained that it wasn't a "legitimate" meeting with Vernonia citizens, anyway, because the board only wanted to take a tour and hadn't planned on actually talking to people.

Does this mean that only elected officials can call "legitimate" meetings? Don't choke on your laughter!



Letters to the Editor

Mayor, council are police review board

To the Editor:

Recently there have been citizen complaints leveled at our local police force. These complaints have been largely that law enforcement has been too rigid and overly aggressive and that this has driven people away from downtown evenings, forcing bars and restaurants to close early for lack of customers.

After review and consideration of the testimony given, I would like to respond to those claims as the Mayor of Vernonia with the approval of the Council members.

First, it is true that on occasion some officers have displayed a lack of courtesy and diplomacy in carrying out their duties. They do need to perform as peace officers as well as police officers. It should suffice to say that lack of conformity to reasonable guidelines has resulted in dismissal from the Vernonia police force. It should also be noted that dismissal occurred before the citizens' appearance at the council meeting.

Secondly, it was suggested that a citizen's police review board be appointed. Such a committee already exists. It is the elected City Council. The Council has the authority to establish policy and the power to hire and fire. It also has the responsibility to recommend approval or denial for liquor license applications. The Council also must represent the desires of all of our 2400+ citizens.

Restaurants and bars closing early can be contributed to many reasons other than cus-

tomers afraid of being in Vernonia at night because of police tactics:

A. Most Vernonians have their dinners in the early evening, seldom after eight o'clock.

B. Some business owners do not want to work the extended hours from logger breakfast time until midnight or later.

C. Some of the local business places do not offer varied menus or a real "dine-out" atmosphere. Local citizens may prefer out-of-town dining experiences where cuisine and surroundings make an evening out a "special" event.

D. Many potential customers are out of town for other reasons. Commuters frequently do much of their business out of town and do not support many of the local businesses.

E. Many of our working class citizens have to make an early morning start to their jobs so they do not spend a lot of late night hours in a bar.

F. Over 50% of our population have incomes below the federal poverty level, plus a large number of senior citizens live on very limited pensions. They may have to make a choice of a night out on the town or buying groceries and paying their bills.

No one should need to be afraid of the police if they conform to the laws. Both patrons of the bars and the owners have responsibilities. A social time and a few games of pool are not going to get anyone in trouble. Responsible citizens do not drink and drive. Drinking to excess, or serving alcohol to an intoxicated person, is not acceptable. We can never afford to ignore the statistics on

automobile accidents and fatalities where alcohol and/or drugs are involved. If police presence and enforcement prevents the violation of the drinking and driving laws or reduces/eliminates family fights, spouse and child abuse, assaults or other social and economic problems, all I can say is GREAT!

Instructing police officers not to enforce all laws is like telling NBA officials not to call fouls unless there is bloodshed and broken bones. Running background checks on drivers stopped for various infractions is an acceptable method of checking for suspended licenses, lack of insurance, stolen vehicles, drug transportation and other more serious offenses.

Courtesy and diplomacy by officers is expected and demanded. The City Council will work with Chief Walters to insure that the proper training and supervision of officers is accomplished. At the same time, the police officers should be commended for providing the public services they render. A police officer risks his life every time he approaches someone in violation of the law. We have had one Vernonia officer killed in the line of duty, we do not need a repeat.

A vast majority of Vernonia citizens live here because of the peace and tranquility. They have frequently voiced a demand that all laws and ordinances be rigidly enforced. They want the streets of Vernonia to be safe — 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I hope they stay that way.

Mayor Art Parrow
Councilor Mario Leonetti
Councilor Cindy Ball