



City of Stevenson

(509) 427-5970

7121 E Loop Road, PO Box 371
Stevenson, Washington 98648

To: Ben Shumaker

Date: May 10, 2017

Re: Written Direction

You do great work for the City most of the time Ben, and I appreciate your input and help with the many areas outside of planning that you help with. Your work facilitating the fire hall site selection process was outstanding. You are currently heading up grant and funding opportunities for our sewer plant expansion, which I also greatly appreciate. I am concerned, however, about one specific issue – your apparent lack of concern for the consequences of saying “no” or otherwise denying a citizen request. As the Planning Director for the City of Stevenson, you are not an autonomous agency but a representative of the City of Stevenson. Your decisions reflect not just on the Planning Department, but on the City.

I’m asking you to interpret all rules with a strong dose of common sense, and to be more sensitive to how you say “no” when you have to say it. You go out of your way to give great customer service most of the time, but occasionally take a stance on a technical issue that we end up losing on appeal. Significant portions of your administrative decision in regard to the Remi Short Plat were overturned by the Hearings Examiner. The applicants (Lasher LLC) met with the Mayor and me to complain about what they perceived as unreasonable decisions you made, which were then overturned by the Hearings Examiner. Having a planning decision overturned on appeal causes the City to incur unnecessary legal fees, but more importantly damages the City’s reputation with our citizens.

In the three years I’ve worked for the City of Stevenson, your decisions have been formally appealed three times and we have lost all three appeals (or the significant portions of them). Please take the following actions with regard to decisions you make in the future:

1. You have a reputation for being overly rigid in your interpretation and enforcement of the rules. Please make a conscious effort to improve this perception. If you’re not sure whether or not a rule or law applies, check with the City Attorney before enforcing it.
2. All decisions are to be made with a strong dose of common sense. If a rule applies, of course we need to follow it. But if the rule doesn’t apply, rely on common sense and try to err on the side of the customer (citizen) when in doubt.
3. Most importantly, be more sensitive to how you work with our citizens when the rules or good practice require you to say “no”. Our citizens need to know that you will work with them when you can. Request pre-meetings for large projects such as short plats and BLA’s so that we can help the customer as much as possible. Similarly, request meetings with applicants when possible before issuing a final decision when the decision adversely affects them. (i.e. to explain to the customer the direction you are heading and why, and to give them a chance to provide additional information that might change your decision).

You are a very knowledgeable planner Ben and an exceptionally smart person, but you have an increasing number of citizens dissatisfied with you. Their dissatisfaction with the planning department reflects negatively on their perception of the City as a whole. I am confident you can reverse this trend by being more sensitive to the needs of our citizens, the importance of making sure they know you are trying to work with them, and ruling against a citizen only when it is required by rule or law or clearly in the City's best interest to do so. It is not enough to give them excellent technical answers to their questions – they need to know that you care about them and are doing everything you can to work with them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Nick Hogan".

Nick Hogan, City Administrator