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Government must be accountable

By Toby Nixon

I firmly disagree with Tim Larson's remarks regarding holding City Council retreats at far-away locations.

Why do Sammamish City Council members and staff feel that they can't speak frankly in front of the citizens who placed them in their positions, and for whom they work? Why is it necessary to leave the city and give reporters and the public "an excuse not to attend," in order for them to be open and honest about how they really feel about city issues? Is Larson saying that when the council is meeting in their chambers that they and the city staff are giving the citizens of Sammamish less than the full truth, keeping some things hidden, and being "guarded?"

No City Council should ever be ashamed or hesitant in any way to have a full and frank discussion of the people's business right at home where the public can observe. The only discussions that should be away from the eyes and ears of the citizens should be those that the people have decided are in the public interest to be (temporarily) private, as enumerated in the Open Public Meetings Act: national security, the maximum the city is willing to pay for a piece of property, the least the city is willing to sell a piece of property for, to consult with legal counsel regarding an active or threatened lawsuit, etc.

There is no reason why council members sharing "ideas and inclinations," giving the city manager "a sense of direction," or receiving "background information" from city staff needs to be done at an inconvenient and expensive location, with the goal of actively and admittedly discouraging the public and the news media from attending. It might be legal, but it is certainly not consistent with the spirit of the Open Public Meetings Act.

That spirit is clearly stated in state law (RCW 42.30.010): "The people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created." Perhaps Larson can explain how holding any council meeting, with the stated purpose of encouraging the people and the media to not attend, is consistent with that spirit.

Rather than following the example of "Bellevue and many other cities" that hold these exclusive "retreats," Sammamish should be setting an example and holding all of its meetings inside the city limits so that all citizens and local news media can attend.

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