



Linda R. Clark
La Conner, Washington 98257

7 August 2025

Town of La Conner
Town Council Members
La Conner, Washington 98257

Re: Planning Commission Vacancies – Non-Resident proposal

Dear Town Council Members:

This first part is a recommendation that the Town of La Conner hold some kind of a healing celebration to bring the community together. There was no “celebration” after the major impact of the COVID pandemic. If the Town is looking for participation from residents, then it is highly advisable that some sort of “celebration” of life occur to denote that this part of history is over. This kind of celebration occurred after World War II and other wars. It helps people to move out of a “trauma – fear based” and “survival” mode into more of a “heart centered” and “thriving” mode. I just found an interesting book on trauma called “My Grandmother’s Hands” by Resmaa Manakem. It centers more on racial trauma, but would be a great oversight for all of you concerning trauma and how it is held in our bodies and our communities. In addition, it would likely provide this governing body with tools to ensure it is making decisions from a rational perspective; rather than a fear-based/survival mode perspective. As someone who spent 15 years healing my own complex trauma as well as seven generations of Mormon ancestors, I can attest to the contents of the book.

[Kindly note at the outset that I am not going to spend a lot of time on this letter. There may be errors.]

This letter concerns your recent proposal to allow non-residents of La Conner to serve as Planning Commission members.

First, I agree with Linda Talman in her Letter to the Editor in the *La Conner Community News* that this proposal is “ludicrous.”

Second, the Town already employs a Hearing Examiner and one or more staff members of the Planning Department who are NOT residents of the Town of La Conner. The negative ramifications of the view points and decisions of these non-residents have been seen clearly over the past few years.

Perhaps instead of looking outside of the La Conner community for commission members, you should spend your time making the position more appealing to people who actually live in La Conner.

For instance, you could begin by strengthening the requirements for commission members so that when they make a suggestion to the Town Council you actually take it seriously.

I have no idea of the credentials of the current Planning Commission members, but you clearly have little or no confidence in their capabilities because you very recently and in the past have ignored their recommendations...which, of course is your right...but at least one of those decisions also went against strong public opinion.

According to the MSRC:

Cities, towns, and counties that fully plan under the Growth Management Act (GMA) are required to have planning commissions to review and make recommendations on comprehensive plans, land use regulations, and **community development issues** to the agency's governing body (the council or board of commissioners). (Emphasis added.)

It also states that :

...creating a planning commission is a good practice because it is a citizen advisory body that represents the jurisdiction.

According to **RCW 35.63.030**

Commissioners—Number—Tenure—Compensation.

The ordinance, resolution, or act creating the commission shall set forth the number of members to be appointed, not more than one-third of which number may be ex officio members by virtue of office held in any municipality. The term of office for ex officio members shall correspond to their respective tenures. The term of office for the first appointive members appointed to such commission shall be designated from **one to six years in such manner as to provide that the fewest possible terms will expire in any one year**. Thereafter the term of office for each appointive member shall be either four or six years, as determined by legislative action of the council.

Vacancies occurring otherwise than through the expiration of terms shall be filled for the unexpired term. Members may be removed, after public hearing, by the appointing official, with the approval of his or her council or board, for inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office.

The members shall be selected without respect to political affiliations and they shall serve without compensation. (Emphasis added.)

Planning Commissioner Qualifications

Most planning commissioners have experience with land use, elected office, engineering, traffic, or development. However, some are laypeople with little experience other than an interest in developing their community.

State law does not mandate required qualifications for planning commissioners, but cities, towns, and counties can adopt their own required qualifications, such as residency requirements.

According to the La Conner Town website, “Planning Commission members **serve six-year terms and must be residents of the Town of La Conner.**” In addition, the Council meets two days a month.

The below is directly from the municipal code. “***” denotes the beginning and end of the insert.

15.130.020 Planning commission – Membership.

(1) A planning commission established by the town shall consist of five members who are residents of the town of La Conner, appointed by the mayor with approval of the town council. Members may be removed from office by the mayor for neglect of duty, inefficiency, or malfeasance in office after a public hearing and with the consent of the town council. Vacancies shall be filled by appointment by the mayor with approval of the town council. The term of office for planning commissioners is six years.

(2) The planning commission shall elect a chairman and vice chairman from among its members, shall appoint a secretary who need not be a member of the commission, and shall adopt rules for transaction of business and shall keep a record of transactions, findings, and determinations.

(3) No less than one regular meeting shall be held each month unless no matters are pending on the commission calendar. Three members shall constitute a quorum to conduct business. A majority is required for a motion to pass.

(4) It shall be deemed neglect of duty for any planning commissioner to miss three consecutive regularly scheduled meetings or to fail to attend at least one training session annually. [Ord. 931 § 4, 2004; Ord. 885 § 1, 2003; Ord. 776 §§ 1, 2, 2000; Ord. 743 § 5, 1999; Ord. 741, 1999; Ord. 671 § 10.2.A – C, 1995.]

15.130.040 Planning commission – Powers and duties.

(1) Annual review of the comprehensive plan and preparation of possible amendments or additions to the plan, for referral to the town council.

(2) **Provide recommendations to the hearing examiner** on conformance of public or private projects to the comprehensive plan as provided in LCMC 15.130.030 and 15.135.050; provide recommendations to the town council to bring nonconforming projects into compliance.

(3) Hold hearings, take testimony and make recommendations to the town council on amendments to the town zoning map or this code or land use ordinances.

(4) Make recommendations or determinations on project permit applications as provided in LCMC 15.130.030 and 15.135.050 and other duties delegated by the town council as set forth herein and as are not inconsistent with the duties delegated to the hearing examiner by Chapter 15.12 LCMC, as amended. [Ord. 743 § 5, 1999; Ord. 691 § 7, 1997; Ord. 671 § 10.2.E, 1995.] {Emphasis added.}

Let's look at this from a perhaps "objective" perspective.

The Town of La Conner is asking a resident to serve for six years allocating a minimum of two evenings a month after reading numerous documents and educating themselves on the laws, code, public opinion, etc. **without compensation.**

Now, let's look at what the Town has done the past five years to make this even remotely feasible (let alone desirable) to someone who may have an interest in serving on the Planning Commission.

1. They approved the re-zoning, purchase, and then immediate sale of the Hedlin Field property for the development of homes which sold for at or above twice the current value of any of the homes in the immediate or surrounding areas. This has resulted in significantly increased property values AND property taxes.
2. The size and design of the homes approved and built in the development ordinarily referred to as "Snapdragon Hill" have been marketed at or above \$1 million dollars. Only one of the two homes built since at or before August 2024 has been sold. However, this has likely led to further increased property values AND taxes. Additional homes are advertised for \$900K or higher. *The other is now*
3. Even after the serious outrage of the residents following the approval of the 306 Centre for Street project (so lovingly named the "Talmon Development"), the Town of La Conner *rent*. has done nothing to give power back to the Planning Commission for projects that truly affect the town and its character.

The below was taken directly from the Municipal Code currently available online concerning where the power lies for approving changes to the Town of La Conner either by "adding or removing". The "****" will denote the beginning and end of the inserted portion.

Article II. Procedure for Project Permit Review

15.135.050 Process classification and procedures.

(1) Classification. Project permits shall be classified by the planning director as Types I through V according to Table A, below.

Table A – Permit Classifications

I Administrative	II Planning Director	III Planning Commission	IV Hearing Examiner	V Town Council
Building and construction permits; LCMC <u>15.135.020</u>	Land use review of permitted and accessory uses exempt from SEPA; LCMC <u>15.135.120</u>	Demolition permits for Type I and II structures; Chapter <u>15.112</u> LCMC		Non-areawide rezone; LCMC <u>15.125.080</u>

I Administrative	II Planning Director	III Planning Commission	IV Hearing Examiner	V Town Council
Lot line adjustments; LCMC <u>15.125.050</u>	Temporary structures; LCMC <u>15.110.030</u>	Historic design review of major new construction; LCMC <u>15.50.060</u>	Conditional use permits; LCMC <u>15.135.190</u>	Final plat; Chapter <u>15.30</u> LCMC
Sign permits; Chapter <u>15.115</u> LCMC	Bed and breakfast; CMC <u>15.20.055</u>	Tree removal permits (excluding residential outside the HPD); Chapter <u>15.60</u> LCMC		Shoreline permit revision
Demolition permits for Type III structures; Chapter <u>15.112</u> LCMC	Critical areas; Chapter <u>15.65</u> LCMC	Temporary use permits; LCMC <u>15.110.050</u>	Preliminary plat approval; Chapter <u>15.30</u> LCMC	
Home occupation permits; LCMC <u>15.110.070</u>	Short plat; Chapter <u>15.30</u> LCMC			
Floodplain permits; Chapter <u>15.70</u> LCMC			Shoreline conditional use permits	
Change of use; LCMC <u>15.125.020</u>	Administrative variance; LCMC <u>15.125.040</u>			
Historic design review of minor new construction; LCMC <u>15.50.060</u>	Administrative conditional use permits; LCMC <u>15.20.055</u>		Shoreline variances	
Shoreline exemptions			Variances; LCMC <u>15.125.040</u>	
Binding site plan; Chapter <u>15.55</u> LCMC	Shoreline substantial development permits		Appeals of planning commission and administrative decisions; LCMC <u>15.12.110</u>	
Accessory uses; LCMC <u>15.40.030</u>			SEPA appeals; LCMC <u>13.10.090</u>	
			PURD; Chapter <u>15.25</u> LCMC	

(2) Procedures. Type I through Type V shall be processed pursuant to the procedures outlined in Table B, below.

Table B – Review Procedures

Process Type	I	II	III	IV	V
Recommendation made by	N/A	N/A	Planning commission, if consolidated with Type IV or V permit applications	Planning director or planning commission	Planning commission
Final decision made by	Planning director, public works director or designees	Planning director or designee	Planning commission unless consolidated with Type IV or V permit applications	Hearing examiner	Town council

Process Type	I	II	III	IV	V
Notice of application	No	Yes ¹	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open record public hearing	No	Only if appealed, open record hearing before hearing examiner	Yes, before planning commission unless consolidated with Type IV or V permit applications	Yes, before hearing examiner for final decision	Yes, before hearing examiner for recommendation
Closed record appeal/final decision	Only if appealed, a closed record hearing before the hearing examiner, except that appeals of a building official order shall be remanded to the Skagit County building appeals board	No	Only if appealed, closed record hearing before hearing examiner	No	Yes, before town council
Judicial appeal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

1. Type II – Open Record Public Hearing. For administrative variance and administrative conditional use applications, a public hearing before the hearing examiner may be requested by the applicant, interested parties, or the planning director.

What is the effect of just these three listed items.

1. Even before these events took place, a significant portion of residents of La Conner were NOT affluent residents. And these voluntary positions have historically been filled by residents who have the means for “spare” time and community service. The increase of property taxes since at or about 2021 has made it more difficult for long time residents to cover these taxes likely resulting in more work hours and less free time. In addition, there is likely fear around these residents that the changes in the property values will not enable them to relocate within the town limits if something were to happen to their current dwelling. This fear also gives residents little incentive to participate in a community in which they may see no future.¹
2. Perhaps these events have even resulted in animosity from the residents.
3. Why would anyone want to spend **SIX years** of their time for free for a Town that clearly couldn’t care less about the people who live here, based on these aforementioned items.

¹ A look at the current history of homes on Fourth Street, Third Street, and Sherman Street on the low land provides validation for this claim. A significant portion of these homes have been owned for at or about ten years. The purchase prices listed on the Skagit County Assessor website for the homes of long-time residents and for homes which have recently transferred ownership highlight this fear of being priced out of the current home market in La Conner.

4. The term “Planning Commission” and the requirements that the members reside in the Town of La Conner make it seem like the members actually impact how La Conner changes. However, as recent events remind residents the Planning Commission members have little or no say in what actually happens...so again, why dedicate their time to what likely appears to most a “lost cause.”

Conclusion

Instead of reaching out to people who don’t live in La Conner to serve on the Planning Commission, perhaps you should review the administrative side to give the Planning Commission the power to actually decide what happens in town. Further, appoint people whose opinion and experience you trust so when they recommend something you actually honor it.

In addition, perhaps it would be advisable to strengthen the relationship between the Planning Commission and Town Council by holding joint meetings, especially when decisions by the Planning Commission are being considered. Only so much information and intent can be conveyed through agendas, reports, and meeting minutes. Perhaps if there is an **actual dialogue** by the Planning Commission members with the Town Council before something is decided then the Planning Commission members won’t feel like their time and energy is being wasted; and their voices and opinions are being heard instead of just being set aside by “people who think they know better.”

I found an interesting document <https://plannersweb.com/2014/10/strengthening-planning-commission-governing-body-relations/>. It is just something I pulled from online, but it may serve as a sample resource in strengthening the relationship between these two bodies. There is likely other information out there. You can look.

Lastly, joint meetings with **ALL** decision making bodies/staff/hearing examiners would be recommended as it is more difficult for any one person to stray from a joint effort by those who are employed, elected, and appointed to serve the **RESIDENTS** of the Town of La Conner if they are considered part of a larger body rather than a “lone wolf.”

Best regards,

Linda R. Clark.

P.S. This letter also serves as a place holder for response concerning the proposed “battery storage” in the Town of La Conner.