

**Bonner County Daily Bee, Monday, Nov. 30, 2009 – by Keith Kinnaird**

## **Bonner General opposes being rezoned**

SANDPOINT — Bonner General Hospital is strongly opposing being rezoned in the city's comprehensive plan. The Sandpoint Planning Commission is conducting a public hearing Tuesday to consider zoning ordinance amendments. The commission meeting starts at 5:30 p.m.

The hospital is currently zoned professional office under the city's comp plan, although the new land use planning blueprint contemplates reclassifying the hospital campus as commercial or possibly even downtown district. The downtown designation would render the hospital a non-conforming use, a prospect which hospital officials are firmly against.

Ford Elsaesser, who serves on the hospital's board of directors, was blunt in his assessment of rezoning plans. "This thing needs to be shot in the head and started over," Elsaesser said in a Nov. 24 letter to Councilman Stephen Snedden.

A downtown-specific zoning designation would relegate the Pine Grove Medical Building to a non-conforming use because the code requires buildings in this zone to have primary entrances which are oriented to the street. Bonner General is a member of Pine Grove. But Snedden said such a rezone is unlikely. Although the comp plan calls for the hospital to be rezoned as commercial, Snedden said city planning staff are recommending the hospital remain professional office. If it remains professional office, the new zoning ordinances wouldn't affect BGH, according to Snedden.

Rezoning the hospital as Commercial A, however, would have impacts. Hospitals are permitted in such zones, although they require three-quarters of the ground floor to be used as retail. Elsaesser contends the standard amounts to a constructive prohibition of the existing use.

"Bonner General Hospital objects to the proposed rezone of its facility and, what appears to be, the elimination of a hospital as a permitted use inside the Sandpoint city limits," he said in a separate letter to the Sandpoint Planning Commission.

In a Nov. 25 e-mail to The Daily Bee addressing the concerns raised by Elsaesser, Snedden emphasized that amending zoning ordinances is a cautious, methodical process that likely won't be completed before the curtain closes on 2009. "Both of these zoning ordinances can and will change. It could easily be changed to allow the hospital to stay in the downtown area," Snedden said.

The new comp plan was groomed over more than 20 City Council meetings and Snedden said he expects commercial zoning efforts to take several months and many meetings. "The new zoning regulations are the most fundamental change to occur in Sandpoint for a decade," he said. "The new commercial zoning will affect every business in Sandpoint that wants to remodel or build for the next two decades.

"These laws need to be the best that the City is capable of and in order to make it that way, the City needs to reach out to local businesses for their opinions."