

Councilman: Water policy talks should have been open

By Ben Orcutt
Daily Staff Writer

FRONT ROYAL — Mayor James M. Eastham was critical on Thursday of remarks made by Councilman Bret W. Hrbek about the town's recently adopted water policy.

The panel voted unanimously Sept. 25 in open session to adopt the policy after holding several closed sessions on the issue.

The policy states that the town manager is the contact person for water and sewer requests and that the request must be made prior to a rezoning action by the County. The town will decide on a case-by-case basis whether to provide water and sewer to the proposed development as well as whether a boundary adjust-

ment is appropriate."

But at the council's Tuesday meeting, Hrbek made a statement that was somewhat critical of how he and his colleagues arrived at the water policy.

"I've had several comments from community members about our decision process, not necessarily our decision," Hrbek said. "I've been trying to figure out a diplomatic way to comment on our decision without offending any of my colleagues up here or look like I am backtracking on my own vote."

"My issue, after thinking about it, we never made our discussions public. I still believe we made the right decision for the town of Front Royal, but that may be because we were discussing in our own echo chamber without any outside opinion."

"So I want to let the citizens of Front

Royal know that I welcome you to come before the council to give your thoughts on this policy during the public session at our meetings or please let me know what your feelings are."

Hrbek also said he would accept constructive comments from county officials as well. No council member responded to his remarks during Tuesday's open session.

"I will take this opportunity to learn and realize that because we can legally discuss something in closed session does not mean we should," Hrbek added. "I also want to reiterate my support of growth of the county and the town and my vote in no way should be taken as an anti-growth vote."

On Thursday, Eastham explained why the council chose to discuss adopting its water policy in closed session.

"We try to conduct the town's business in open meetings as much as possible, but in discussing policy for the town's water utility, there are legal and contractual matters which come into the discussion," Eastham said. "After consulting with the town attorney, it seemed more appropriate to put it on as a closed session agenda item and that's what I did. Mr. Hrbek participated in the meetings and had the opportunity to voice any concerns he might have had, but he didn't."

Councilman Stanley W. "Stan" Brooks Jr. said he agrees with the deci-

sion to discuss the matter in closed session.

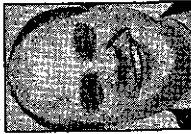
"It seemed appropriate to me," Brooks said.

"He's entitled to his opinion," Vice Mayor Timothy W. Dart said of Hrbek's remarks. "Besides that, I have no comment."

While pleased that the town has developed a water and sewer policy, Happy Creek Supervisor Tony F. Carter has voiced concerns about the closed-session discussions.

"We tried to be up front and open and I don't know why the need for the secrecy and where the mistrust toward the county is coming from," Carter has said. "We discussed this openly in public meetings."

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Hrbek