

95

Changes could be in store for Dillon city government

By John Barrows

There are several possibilities for future changes in city government in Dillon, according to two Montana State University employees.

Dr. Ken Weaver and Dr. Judy Mather of the Local Government Center at MSU, told members of the Dillon City Council that "more responsibility is coming your way," and that demands on government will increase in the future.

Weaver and Mather are both former Bozeman mayors and with the Local Government Center they have been going around the state explaining the government study commission process and conducting training sessions for those elected to local government study commissions.

Before attending the city council's meeting last week, they had worked with city commission members Keith Reeder, Cindy Eccleston and Marty Malesich. All three were elected last year to study city government and make possible recommendations for change, which would be voted on by the public next year.

"Montana is the only state that does voter review. It's a wonderful reminder that people are entrusted with government," Weaver said. "The study commissions are empowered to make

a wide range of recommendations, from disincorporation to managers to consolidation. It represents, he added, "a substantial grant of authority to the citizens."

"It is not," he cautioned, "an opportunity for a witch hunt."

Weaver and Mather, in their meetings with the various study commissions across the state, have been encouraging cooperation between the city or counties and the study commission.

In all, Weaver said, there are three alternative forms of government available for communities the size of Dillon, and that they are defined by statute. There is also a long legal tradition, he added, that if a local government has not declared itself to be self-governing, it can only follow existing laws.

He said they have recommended to the study commission to look at a self-governing charter to strengthen local government's powers.

"The charter," Mather explained to the council, "is your own constitution, noting that only 14 local governments in the state have moved in that direction, and they are able to modify their governmental powers.

Under a self-governing charter, Weaver said, "if the state doesn't prohibit it, the local government can do it."

It also means, if the people approve a self-governing charter, "that your future will get a hell of a lot more complicated."

Although most of the cities that have already approved the charter form of government are larger, like Billings, Butte/Silver Bow, Great Falls and Helena, there are a number of other communities, both the same size and smaller than Dillon, that

have voted to make the change. Among those cities and towns, Mather said, are Belgrade, West Yellowstone, Whitefish, Ennis, Libby, Troy, Circle, Bridger and Sunburst.

The Dillon City Government Study Commission has currently approved a substantial survey to be done of 600 local residents to "seek out the thoughts of city

residents," Dillon Study Commission Chairman Keith Reeder told the council. The commission has already met with city staff members and will have individual meetings with council members from each ward.

The first meetings, with council members from Wards 1 and 2 were held Tuesday of this week and meetings with council members from Wards 3 and 4 will be held July 11, at 7:30 and 8:15 p.m. at City Hall.