

# Planner won't face criminal charges

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## Howell resigns post to take on task of finishing Comprehensive Plan

COEUR d'ALENE -- A potentially embarrassing and costly personnel situation for the county ended with everyone seemingly satisfied and no one going to jail.

Cheri Howell, a former senior planner with Kootenai County, was the subject of a criminal investigation after she was accused of ordering the destruction of an audio recording of a Planning Commission public meeting -- a felony -- after two planning commissioners were allegedly badmouthing county planning director Scott Clark last fall.

The county called the police and a three-month investigation ensued.

On Wednesday, Coeur d'Alene Chief Criminal Deputy Prosecutor Wes Somerton said Howell will not face any criminal charges for her involvement in the erasure of a public record on Sept. 24, 2007.

"This office has reviewed the police report and witness statements gathered in the Coeur d'Alene Police Department's investigation together with applicable statutes and case law and decided that no criminal charges will be filed against Ms. Howell," Somerton said in a prepared statement.

Howell resigned as a senior planner in the Planning and Building Department Wednesday afternoon, leaving her \$48,000 annual salary behind. Moments later, she was hired by the county as an independent contractor for \$75,000 to finish the county's Comprehensive Plan by May 31.

"I am relieved this is over and I am very interested in moving forward," Howell said. "I am not looking back."

Sources said Howell's saga began when members of the planning department went to the commissioners after the tape was erased. The sources said Howell isn't well liked by the county's planning department because of her leadership style and that it was an attempt by several individuals to oust her from her job.

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The city didn't release any police reports or audio interviews of the investigation. The county maintains the digital recording of the Planning Commission meeting can't be found.

Commission Chairman Rick Currie said it was "doubtful" that any other employees would be disciplined for their roles in accusing Howell or destroying the recording.

Howell's attorney, Scott Poorman, previously demanded the commissioners give Howell a public apology for their handling of the situation.

She didn't get one.

The commissioners were asked if they had any regrets for going to police before they talked to Howell about the accusations or not conducting an internal investigation.

They didn't.

Commissioner Todd Tondee said, "We'll be looking at the process. It took too much time."

Currie said Howell's situation was a "personnel matter" and "We were in uncharted waters with the tapes."

Currie, Tondee, and Commissioner Rich Piazza said they wanted to move forward and finish the Comprehensive Plan as soon as possible.

"It puts a deadline on the Comprehensive Plan," Currie said. "Changing horses is not advantageous to the county."

Howell said she resigned to pursue her consulting business and earn her master's degree in education. Howell's contract calls for her to act as a coordinator and facilitator for the Planning

Commission. She also will coordinate the development of an impact fees ordinance by May 31. Howell will be paid in three installments, but has no provisions if she fails to meet the requirements of the contract.