

Anaconda Study Commission

174 Proposal would cut chief's duties

BY BILL HEISEL JR.
of The Montana Standard

ANACONDA — The Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Study Commission will present a tentative proposal tonight to split the chief of law enforcement position from the post of coroner and ambulance director.

"We think the chief has an enormous responsibility now just being chief of law enforcement without these other duties interfering," said Jake Maciag, chairman of the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Study Commission.

"He has control of 11 different budgets and gets almost 35 percent of the county budget now. His expertise should really be in law enforcement," Maciag said.

The plan is one part of a specific list of duties the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Study Commission will discuss in a public hearing at 7:30 p.m. tonight in the courthouse courtroom. Another plan would make county attorney — currently the only local race run on party lines — a nonpartisan position.

Maciag said that when the local charter was amended in 1993 to establish the chief as an elected position, no duties were spelled out, unlike the chief executive and county attorney positions, which have specific duties.

Because Jim Connors won the election in 1993, he continued to

act as coroner and ambulance director, but Maciag points out that even under the current charter those positions could be given to someone else by the county chief executive and the county commission.

"There's nothing in there that says the chief of law enforcement has to have those duties. We just want to clean up the charter," Maciag said. "We took the duties right from the Montana Code Annotated."

Maciag said that if voters approve the charter amendment, another police officer could be appointed coroner, perhaps one of the five who currently serve as deputy coroners. And the ambulance director could be picked from one of the two ambulance administrators, Maciag said.

Chief of Law Enforcement Jim Connors, who also serves as the county's chief coroner for \$3,600 a year, said separate positions might interfere with the examination of a fresh crime scene. The coroner could close the scene or remove the body before the police had finished their work, Connors said.

"The recent homicide involving the McElroy boy is a perfect example of how well this works, and how valuable this part of the investigation is to preserve the chain of evidence in homicide cases," Connors said.

Capt. Mark Blaskovich, a deputy coroner and one of two offi-

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The Anaconda-Deer Lodge County Study Commission will hold a public hearing at 7:30 p.m. tonight in the courthouse courtroom on tentative proposals to change the chief of law enforcement and county attorney positions.

Written comments on these or other study commission proposals can be sent to the courthouse until Wednesday.

ers challenging Connors' in the June primary, said he also thinks coroner and chief of law enforcement should remain one position. But he doesn't disagree with another part of the commission's plan, which would give the chief executive some control over the law enforcement chief's duties.

"I'm not a power-hungry person, and I think I would just try to work things out with the chief executive," Blaskovich said.

Sgt. Joe Guiberson, the third candidate, said he favors an independent coroner and a chief of law enforcement who is subordinate to the county chief executive.

"The chief of law enforcement should be able to run his department, but he has to be held accountable and not just by the voters every four years," Guiberson said.

Maciag said the commission

based its idea in part on the w the elected positions of secret of state, attorney general and state auditor answer to the go nor.

He also said a survey of counties showed that about half ha partisan elections for the cour attorney but very few share A conda's trait of having the co attorney as the only partisan race.

This year, both County Attny Ed Beaudette and local la yer Mike Grayson have filed a Democrats for the position. Th race probably will be decided the June primary because no c filed for the Republican nomin tion.

Neither candidate has very strong feelings either way.

Grayson, who is also a men of the study commission, said county attorney would benefit from being removed from the political process and voters mi also benefit. In the current rac for example, Republicans won be able to vote for the county a torney if they pick up a Republ can ballot in the primary.

Beaudette said making the position nonpartisan would just extend the election cycle and make it harder for incumbents concentrate on their jobs. He sa people who want to vote for the county attorney will cross party lines.