

First priority – a first-rate plan

Current draft Comprehensive Plan won't sustain Jackson Hole.

By **Kristy Bruner**

Alliance Community Planning Director

Nearly a year ago, our community set out to refine its Comprehensive Plan in order to increase predictability in land use decisions in Teton County and Jackson.

The updated plan is also supposed to ensure that future development is guided in a such a way that the assets most important to residents are protected in the long term. Throughout the update process, the community has made it clear that stewardship of wildlife and other natural resources is its top priority.

To be both effective and predictable, the Comp Plan needs to clearly define what it means for us as a gateway community to be stewards of one of the last relatively intact ecosystems in North America, and of all the increasingly rare flora and fauna it holds.

The plan needs to be guided by a planning approach that is as unique and unparalleled as Jackson Hole itself. As such, it must be based on the foundation that our wildlife and natural resources are of the highest importance – not only to the integrity of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, but also to our culture and economy.

WHAT'S NEXT: On Aug. 25 at 3 p.m., 200 S. Willow, town councilors and county commissioners are set to discuss the next steps of the Comp Plan process and some of its “big picture” elements, including the possibility of shifting development potential from county to town. Since cooperation and coordination between the town and county are crucial for success of the Comp Plan update, this is a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, the planning team has committed to releasing another round of draft policies and maps later this fall for public review. Check www.jhalliance.org/issuescompplan.htm for updates.

The Comp Plan must acknowledge and define how rare and irreplaceable some of our assets are, and it must spell out all the factors that contribute to our ability to protect, or lose, these assets.

The current draft Comp Plan released this summer fails to do this. (See box.)

During the next months, the Conservation Alliance will continue to emphasize why it's critical to take a much closer look at what sustainability should mean for Jackson Hole.

A key aspect of this is recognizing capacity and thresholds. To be sustainable, we must be willing to acknowledge the very real limitations in meeting different community goals. The next stage of the Comp Plan update process must tackle this, or we'll just set ourselves up to lose what we all cherish about Jackson Hole.

Now is the time to ask and answer the tough questions. We need to figure out not only what our development pattern should look like (what the plan has mostly focused on to date), but also how much additional development our community and wildlife can bear without irreparable harm. To be effective stewards, we have to truly define our priorities and the steps we need to take to uphold them. ■

How the draft plan fails

- It lacks a concise, clear description of the community's core priority – protecting wildlife.
- It doesn't reflect public input or strong planning approaches in fundamental areas, doesn't prioritize issues, and doesn't appear to be based on comprehensive or accurate assumptions.
- It includes some positive “themes and policies” but it fails to frame and describe them in relation to each another, and it fails to address them in terms of capacities, thresholds and conflicting priorities.
- Too many key details are missing, especially regarding the future land use maps. (See next page.)
- Much of the clear language of the 1994 Comp Plan has been dropped, without sufficient replacement.

Significant changes need to be made to the draft Comp Plan for it to have a strong, comprehensible foundation; provide predictability in decision-making; and give direction for how community priorities should be addressed in an integrated way. Without a strong, clear Comp Plan, we can't protect what we all value about Jackson Hole.

The Alliance's full comments on the draft plan, as well as a list of people you can share *your* comments with, are available via www.jhalliance.org/issuescompplan.htm.

“Gateway communities seeking to develop a vital local economy must ensure that growth and economic development don't come at the expense of their unique identity, quality of life, economic diversity, and fiscal well-being.... Without well-designed and publicly supported strategies to preserve their character and surroundings, gateway communities risk undermining the very assets responsible for their economic vitality and future potential.” – *Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities* by Jim Howe, Ed McMahon and Luther Propst

“Our generation faces the greatest challenge of all. The Greater Yellowstone region is growing at two times – and habitat loss at six times – the national rate.... At the current rate of permanent habitat loss, the extraordinary wildlife that characterizes this region will not be maintained for future generations.”

– Paul Hansen, Director of the Nature Conservancy's Greater Yellowstone Program

Time to get down to details

Without numbers, draft plan and its consequences aren't predictable.

By Kristy Bruner

Alliance Community Planning Director

If you're one of the many people who've asked planners for more details during the current Comp Plan update process, you may have heard, "Don't worry about the details yet; the revision of our land development regulations will take care of that."

We respectfully disagree. Without an appropriate level of detail, what the draft plan proposes isn't predictable, and neither are its consequences. To make matters worse, the plan says it provides rigor and specificity, and that it addresses links between community goals, but it doesn't actually do so.

Unlike the 1994 Comp Plan under which we're now operating, the updated document will include a physical land use plan. These maps are the key elements intended to bring predictability to future land use decisions. Since future zoning maps will have to be consistent with what the Comp Plan maps

depict (in terms of development locations and densities), it's critical to understand – and evaluate the consequences of – the amount and type of development proposed.

These maps must strategically guide future land use decisions. They can't do that unless they're based on real, on-the-ground analyses of existing conditions in Teton County and Jackson.

What types of numbers do we need to do these analyses? To assess links between different land use issues (transportation, workforce housing, habitat connectivity, etc.) and evaluate potential consequences within different scenarios, the buildout ranges for a number of key variables need to be identified. The draft plan and maps lack these figures.

Among the missing pieces are:

- Residential build-out ranges (numbers of housing units) and commercial build-out ranges (total square footage) linked to map locations and densities

- Commercial build-out ranges and employee generation ranges (and what demand for workforce housing would these generate?)
- Traffic analyses based on local resident, visitor and commuter traffic demands (including an assessment in peak season)
- Fiscal impacts: How much will this plan end up costing the community for infrastructure and services?
- Direct and indirect effects of increased human populations on wildlife habitat and wildlife
- Identification of conservation priority areas by the community (surveys show that people support taxes or bonds to protect open space; how would those areas be ranked?)
- Lodging unit numbers and types

Without an understanding of details like these, and analysis of the information, the plan is fatally flawed. Our community must demand a plan that protects the qualities we value, or face a future without them. ■

NUMBERS UP = QUALITY OF LIFE DOWN

Despite community support for controlling Jackson Hole's rate of growth and reducing our overall development potential, the draft Comp Plan doesn't adequately address either. Planners do claim that the updated plan will aim to maintain development potential allowed under the 1994 Comp Plan. However, buildout numbers provided in a myriad of planning documents and presentations have been significantly inconsistent.

The following conservative estimates were given in Comp Plan consultant Clarion Associates' "Existing Conditions Snapshot" in January:

Existing development (2005) in Jackson & Teton County:	Additional capacity at '94 plan base zoning:	Total buildout:
Approx. 11,300 housing units	9,150 housing units	20,450 housing units
9.5 million sq. ft. of commercial	1.9 million sq. ft. of commercial	11.4 million sq. ft. of commercial

Zoning options, such as Jackson's planned mixed-use development tool, could increase potential buildout way over these numbers, but just for fun, let's try this math on for size: (9,150 additional housing units) x (anywhere between 1.74 and 2.37 people per unit) (2.37 is the standard multiplier; local planners say they're using 1.74 to adjust for part-time residents) = anywhere between 15,921 and 21,686 **more** residents upon buildout.

About 20,000 people currently live in Jackson Hole, others commute here to work, and at peak times of the year, about 15,000 more tourists are visiting daily. The upshot? Future "off-season" populations and their effects will at best resemble what we now experience during the summer. And come summertime? Use your imagination.

HELP IS ON THE WAY

The Alliance will soon bring in experts to address some of our community's most challenging land use planning issues. After the updated Comp Plan is finalized (probably in 2009), the next phase is identifying strategies to implement the plan and rewriting our land development regulations. So our speaker series is intended to offer information and solutions at a time when they are needed most. With the benefit of lessons learned elsewhere, our community can identify and adopt the best strategies to carry out its vision.

The experts will address these issues relevant to our community: Affordable housing; growth-related fiscal impacts analysis; road ecology and wildlife-friendly transportation; and cumulative impacts analysis, with particular focus on natural resource protection.

We'll post details at www.jhalliance.org as soon as they're available. *This speaker series has been generously funded in part by The Community Foundation of Jackson Hole.*