

Board wants growth halted

Place moratorium on big new neighborhoods, except Teton Meadows, planners advise.

*By Cara Froedge, Jackson Hole, Wyo.
April 16, 2008*

A moratorium that could stall some development projects larger than 20 acres through the end of the year advanced this week with the backing of county planning commissioners.

On Monday, the Teton County Planning Commission voted 3-1 to advise the Teton County Board of Commissioners to enact a freeze on subdivisions and zone changes for parcels of 20 acres or more. However, the board recommended that commissioners vote on the 500-home Teton Meadows Ranch proposal before considering a development freeze.

That way, planning commissioners said, leaders would not have to exempt any projects from a moratorium. The planning board had previously backed the Teton Meadows plan in a split vote.

"[Teton Meadows] is 75 to 80 percent through the planning process," said Chairman Tony Wall. "While that doesn't give them a legal foothold. ... I still feel [the application] is at a point where it really deserves prompt adjudication by the Board of County Commissioners."

Commissioner Forrest McCarthy voted against recommending the moratorium because he thought it should apply to Teton Meadows, he said. Commissioner Paul Duncker was absent.

About a dozen people spoke about the temporary ban, most of whom supported it. Only three people spoke against it.

"This is a way of not dealing with [Teton Meadows,]" said Cindy Budge, who accused county commissioners of avoiding tough, controversial votes on developments during an election year.

Planning commissioners are recommending a development freeze that would prohibit review, recommendation or approval of zoning changes or subdivisions larger than 20 acres. The measure also would prevent a developer from applying for a pre-application conference if the project is a subdivision or zoning change for more than 20 acres.

Applications for projects that already have master-plan approvals, such as the Grand Targhee and Teton Village expansions, as well as county-sponsored development, such as the Wilson commercial zoning district or new day-care centers, would be allowed to proceed. Planning commissioners also inserted a clause stating that "reasonable variance applications" could be approved during the period.

The temporary ban, applicable only outside town limits, would expire at the end of 2008 or when the new comprehensive plan is adopted, whichever comes first.

County Commissioner Ben Ellis proposed a similar moratorium April 1 to allow time for the community to update its comprehensive plan.

That plan guides growth and outlines the best place for and proper number of homes and businesses. It also determines what land has special resources, such as scenic values or wildlife habitat.

3 project plans with 1,114 homes total

While the county has been holding a series of public forums and surveys for input on revising that plan, it's also been considering Teton Meadows Ranch, a 500-home development proposed for south of town. Just after Teton Meadows won planning commissioners conditional backing in March, the county received requests to look at two other developments.

The first, a rezoning of up to 80 acres of Jackson Hole Hereford Ranch, could accommodate 299 dwellings. The other — from Three Ranchers LLC, made up of Lucas, Von Gontard and Robertson family members — would add as many as 315 new homes through a three-part land deal.

"The sheer number of units in the development pipeline, in my mind, exceeds the availability of the planning staff to handle those questions adequately in the context of what are very important issues being discussed in the comp plan," Ellis told planning commissioners Monday.

A 20-acre threshold, Ellis said, would allow for smaller affordable housing neighborhoods, similar to Osprey Creek, to be considered during this moratorium, while halting other large scale developments.

Ellis also said elected officials had discussed enacting a moratorium when they decided to pursue the plan revisions but decided instead to monitor development applications. After Three Ranchers and the Porter Estate proposed pre-application conferences for developments, commissioners thought it was time to act, he said.

Some said elected officials are overreacting.

"Why now?" asked Nancy Arkin, a planner with Teton Meadows. "Those proposals have requested pre-applications. They haven't submitted any application yet."

It will take months from the time Three Ranchers and the Porter Estate have their conferences to submit a planning application, Arkin said.

Meanwhile, Teton Meadows submitted its application in August, before the comprehensive plan revisions got under way, she said.

If a moratorium is enacted and covers Teton Meadows, it likely would kill the project, developers have said. Representatives revealed in recent weeks that the option to purchase the property is close to expiring and cannot be extended without "considerable" additional cost to the developer.

Still, proponents of the moratorium said it should include Teton Meadows.

"Nine months is not long to wait for a project of this size," said Kristin Vito, a real estate agent. Teton Meadows' deadline to purchase the property should not enter the debate, she said.

Armond Acri said the only way to have a fair moratorium is to include everyone.

"If big developments like this go forward, people will feel disenfranchised and alienated from the process," he said.

Some want bigger moratorium

Some proponents called for the freeze to go further.

The Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, while it agreed with the proposal, also wants the planned-unit-development-for-affordable-housing zoning to be included and the freeze enacted for one year, said Kristy Bruner, community planning director.

Melody Ranch resident and ardent Teton Meadows critic Rich Bloom agreed that the affordable housing zoning should be included. That is particularly important because there is a proposed regulation to change that zoning working its way through county planning right now.

One opponent said the moratorium is aimed at the wrong targets.

"It's a misguided effort to slow growth in the valley," said Peter Stewart, an economist. "It's only going to hurt the middle class, the working class in the valley."

Stewart said the county hasn't seen a huge spike in growth. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau recently released statistics showing the county's population has just surpassed 20,000 people. Teton County saw an increase of 300 residents from 2006 to 2007, of which 185 were babies, Stewart said.

Further, during the last decade, the county has only seen a 9 percent increase in population, or about 1 percent per year, he said. New home growth also has averaged about 1 percent to 2 percent a year, Stewart said.

"We're not seeing this exorbitant population and home growth," he said. "This growth is really growth in the valley's jobs, growth in traffic. It comes from 1,000-employee Four Seasons and 500-employee Amanganis and Hotel Terras, three private resorts, golf courses, Center for the Arts and second- and third-homeowner construction."

Stewart said the moratorium is addressing development that has nothing to do with actual growth.

"All it does it put development that address the needs for the lower-end, working class further back in the future and gives no-growthers room to further their agenda," he said.

Planning commissioners agreed that the county needs to act.

Commissioner Joe Palmer said there was no freeze in place when the planning commission held public hearings on

Teton Meadows. For that reason, the application should proceed, he said.

"I think we should not exclude Teton Meadows, but we should recommend to the county that it not act on the moratorium proposal until it handles the Teton Meadows Ranch application," he said.

While Commissioner Larry Hamilton said he supports a moratorium, he said the planning process should be respected by voting on Teton Meadows.

"We spent a lot of time getting a lot of public comment on Teton Meadows," Hamilton said.

Yet commissioner McCarthy said he would like to see the moratorium exemption reduced to 15 acres and Teton Meadows included.

"I really thought it would be more appropriate to decide on the project after the comp plan was finished," he said. "I still believe that."