

Land-use plan irks residents

Some say surveys called for a different roadmap than the growth outlined in a new town/county proposal.

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County residents are speaking out against the new comprehensive plan, alleging that it proposes more growth than the community wants.

Since the draft of the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan was released more than a week ago, public comment has started trickling in to officials. Some of that comment claims that the plan proposes to permit development in areas where residents want it limited, including South Park, the Aspens and the Town of Jackson.

The plan proposes allowing between 5,400 to 9,900 new units across the valley. County planners assume 1.78 people per unit.

"Many in our community strongly believe that the sustainability of Jackson Hole does not depend on continued expansion of development potential," wrote Kristy Bruner, community planning director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance. "... Our community's top priority, to protect wildlife, will not be achieved through a focus on development pattern alone.

"We must be willing to address, in a meaningful way, how the amount of development (residential and commercial) will affect our ability to uphold community priorities," she wrote. "Ultimately, we cannot grow our way out of growth-related problems."

The plan is available online at www.jacksontetonplan.com. Hard copies can be purchased at Staples.

Residents are encouraged to provide written comment on the Web site by May 15 so those can be compiled for planning commission hearings, which start at the town and county in June.

Public comment will be taken until the plan is adopted.

While individuals and groups are still wading through the 150-page document, which has an additional 400-page appendix, some already are taking issue with the growth it proposes.

According to planners, feedback solicited during phone surveys and public forums indicated the community eschewed a "no-growth" plan. But Bruner and others reject that claim.

"The Conservation Alliance respectfully disagrees with this analysis of public comment," Bruner said.

According to the alliance's interpretation of survey results, Bruner said, community asked for a "least-growth" scenario, or limiting growth.

"Our review of the different sources of public input data indicates strong community support for limiting overall growth," she said.

For example, during a public meeting in January 2008, 82 percent of respondents voted for a growth scenario that would result in limited or no expansion of developed county residence "nodes" or neighborhoods. That also would have no additional development in the South Park area beyond that allowable under current zoning, Bruner said.

In other instances, the majority of people polled voted for limiting overall growth and lowering development potential, her letter states.

"[I]t appears misleading to imply that the public has voiced support for additional growth, rather than reduced or density-neutral land-use planning valley-wide," the letters states.

Rich Bloom, founder of South Park neighbors, said he felt the community was ignored.

"I can not express how disappointed I am with the foundation of the plan, the South Park District description and the planners' blatant morphing of the community's will and vision for the plan (with the possible direction of some electeds)," he wrote to members of his group.

In the South Park node, the community could see as many as 1,500 new units.

Bloom said the plan contains many improvements but its foundation is based on the "falsehood" that the community's priority is more growth.

"This is both a misrepresentation and also fundamentally untrue," he said.

Bloom also said the community "clearly" stated that it wants less growth.

While he expected a modest increase in units to incentivize housing in the nodes, he said he never expected it to such a magnitude.

"The planners are misstating the facts by saying that in the polling and surveys the public did not want a reduced growth plan but only wanted managed growth," he said.

County Planning Director Jeff Daugherty disagrees.

"The surveys are not what the comp plan is based on," he said.

Planners convened multiple groups to help craft the plan and received feedback from many, including elected officials, he said.

"So the surveys were an important element but not the only element," Daugherty said.

Further, Daugherty said the plan offers a range of build-out numbers. The lowest number, 5,400 units, is what's permitted under today's plan. That low number is a limited growth plan, he said.

Yet at that end, elected officials don't have the ability to negotiate with landowners for conservation easements to protect open space, another priority valley residents expressed.

With the high number of 9,900, officials can use density as a currency, Daugherty said. With a higher number, developers can build more units if they provide conservation easements elsewhere.

"That's what the community also said it wanted, some assurance that lands will be preserved in perpetuity," Daugherty said.