

South Park project bashed

County, town planners say plan for 500-unit Teton Meadows Ranch needs work.

*By Cara Froedge
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A proposed 500-home development in South Park has too little affordable housing, is not eligible for a rezone and is too dense, various planners said in recent weeks.

According to comments sent to the Teton County planning office about the proposed Teton Meadows Ranch development, developer James Reinert needs to offer affordable housing for as many as 214 more people, is not eligible to be rezoned as a Neighborhood Conservation 2 district and proposes too many homes for an area of the county that's already "maxed out."

Comments came from agencies such as the Teton County Housing Authority, Jackson Hole Community Pathways and the Town of Jackson planning department, which was the most vocal. Some comments from other agencies are still outstanding.

The agencies reviewed the development proposal as part of the county planning department's analysis of the application. Reinert's proposal has not been scheduled for a hearing before the county planning commission, which will review the application before it moves to the Board of Commissioners.

Jim Verdone, lead planner for the project, said the team is in the process of responding to those comments.

"In the next week or two, we hope to have some responses back to the county on various agencies' comments," Verdone said.

Teton Meadows Ranch is proposed on 288 acres of the 336-acre Roger Seherr-Thoss property adjacent to Rafter J and Melody Ranch. The application proposes to rezone the property from Rural to Neighborhood Conservation 2 to construct 125 traditional affordable homes, with the remaining 375 "Homestead units" reserved for those who work 30 hours a week in Teton County and agree to own only one residential property.

Most of Town of Jackson Interim Planning Director Jeff Noffsinger's comments challenged Teton Meadows' application for a zoning change. He said the proposed new subdivision also does not meet the definition of infill development.

The Neighborhood Conservation district applies only to existing neighborhoods and undeveloped parcels within existing neighborhoods, he said.

Further, "infill" describes development that is already zoned in the district or occupies vacant land within areas that are already developed. It also refers to urban and suburban settings made up of small parcels, he wrote.

"Should the applicant's definition of infill be accepted, the precedent would severely undermine the intent of the NC zone – which does not contemplate development of this scale – by allowing land that simply borders existing development ... to be considered infill," he wrote.

Allowing a rural setting to be infilled "gives license to drastic changes," he wrote.

Verdone said the team still believes it can apply for a zoning change to Neighborhood Conservation 2.

Further, Verdone said Noffsinger's letter failed to address how Teton Meadows impacts the Town of

Jackson.

"It seemed to be very ... personal and expressed opinions that didn't seem appropriate from our point of view," Verdone said. "We've had discussions with the town, and I don't think that those opinions expressed in the letter necessarily relate to what the town council may feel about the project. We've asked for clarification about that."

Noffsinger, whose comments were also questioned by the town council (see box), also said the proposed density may be inappropriate if the majority of Teton Meadows residents are employed in town or other areas of the county. The traffic study should include impacts to roads in town or other parts of the county, he wrote.

"A linkage between employment location and residence for the project may be necessary," he wrote.

Density raises concerns

Noffsinger said the comprehensive plan encourages development of mixed-use villages and orienting development around existing commercial areas. If the majority of Teton Meadows residents will be employed in the South Park area, then the proposed density may be appropriate, Noffsinger wrote.

Still, "South Park is arguably maxed out on density," he wrote.

Noffsinger also criticized the site design, saying the affordable units should be more integrated throughout and indistinguishable from the market units.

"The open space configuration seems to respond to NIMBYism and little else," he wrote.

The site contains numerous naturally occurring and irrigation-induced wetlands toward which open space should be oriented, he wrote. Noffsinger also questioned the idea of "homestead ownership" and said units appear to revert to a market unit after two-years.

"This gives occupants an incentive to sell the units after this period, thereby precipitating the decline of attainable housing," he wrote. "Given the unpredictable, or unsettlingly predictable, nature of these units over the long-term, it is inappropriate that they should represent 75 percent of the project."

Noffsinger wrote that the developer must disclose the sale price of the homes. Reinert has called the prices "substantially less" than market value but has not released more information.

"If 'substantially' less is not deemed to be substantial, then the project is fundamentally flawed," Noffsinger wrote.

In her review, housing authority Associate Planner Emily Van Engel said the authority is "thrilled" that Teton Meadows proposed a subdivision to target the local workforce.

Yet Van Engel said Teton Meadows is not offering enough traditional affordable housing. Its proposal is for 167 people. Based on the housing authority's calculations, the subdivision should provide homes for 202 people at a 15 percent mitigation rate and for 381 people at a 25 percent rate.

Another concern is that Teton Meadows is not providing enough of a mix of housing types. Teton Meadows proposed that all Category 1 homes, a type of affordable housing, have one bedroom. All Category 2 homes should have two and three bedrooms and Category 3 homes have three bedrooms, she wrote.

"We have a need for all types of homes at each of the categories, so it would be great if the applicant could propose a more diverse distribution," Van Engel wrote.

Beyond the traditional affordable homes, Teton Meadows proposes to dedicate land to the housing authority, Jackson Hole Community Housing Trust and Habitat for Humanity for an additional 50 “hybrid” affordable units.

“While this conveyance of land is a generous offer from the applicant, [housing authority] staff wants to make it clear that it would still cost housing groups a considerable subsidy to build the 50 units on this land,” she wrote.

Although land is probably the most expensive aspect of building housing, Van Engel said she estimated a subsidy of \$100,000 per home.

“The Board of County Commissioners will need to decide if it is appropriate for our community housing group to devote considerable resources to building housing as part of the development,” she wrote.

Van Engel said she needs more information regarding the homestead parcels, a new concept. Lots there need to have affordable sale prices from the start as well as deed restrictions to ensure they will remain available and affordable to local workers, she said.

“The applicant should provide the initial sales prices as well as rules governing the appreciation of the units/lots that will keep them available to our workforce in the future,” she wrote. “Only with initial sales prices and a draft deed restriction can [housing authority] staff confirm that the applicant is meeting the intent of the development concept.”

Verdone said his group will be meeting with the housing authority to discuss the various issues and the agency’s recommendations. “We made a stab at what we thought was right, and they came back with something different,” Verdone said. “We’ll sort it out with them.”

Homestead-ownership property will not be subject to caps on appreciation but will have deed restrictions to prevent speculation. Developers have said wages of those who work in the county will determine resale values. Deed restrictions won’t set a cap on how much a property can appreciate in a year, as is the practice in the county’s other affordable housing programs.

While Teton Meadows is proposing that residents must work 30 hours a week to qualify (1,500 hours a year), the Teton County School District wrote in its comments that requirements should be reduced to 1,480 hours. Otherwise, full-time district employees could not be eligible for the units.

Verdone said the team didn’t realize its calculation of 1,500 hours would exclude district employees. Since receiving those comments, developers have decided to reduce the requirement by 20 hours a year.

According to Rachel Markko, a natural resources specialist with the Teton Conservation District, the property is one of the last places in the area for animals to use during seasonal migration.

“Though significant residential development has and is continuing to occur in this area, every attempt to maintain and restore its native landscape is very important,” Markko wrote.

She recommended that dogs be controlled and fencing be wildlife-friendly. She also suggested destroying as little natural habitat as possible and avoiding placing structures within or adjacent to wetlands.

Verdone said there isn’t much wildlife value on the property, and the county’s comprehensive plan lays out what is critical wildlife habitat. “We don’t fall into that,” he said.

A town sewer system hookup

Town of Jackson Engineer Shawn O'Malley said Teton Meadows can hook up to the town sewer system with agreement from the town council.

There's plenty of room for the development, he said, as the sewer facility is not even at half capacity. Now, it's taking in about 2.3 million gallons a day. Teton Meadows would add about 300,000 gallons daily. Capacity is 5 million gallons a day, he said.

Teton County Engineer Jeff Hermansky wrote that his office believes Teton Meadows hasn't addressed the impact on South Park Loop Road and the appropriate exaction fees that will need to be assessed.

Hermansky said he anticipates most Teton Meadows residents will travel east on South Park Loop Road during earlier phases of construction. During the morning rush hour, the traffic will cause people turning north onto Highway 89 to stack up while waiting to turn.

"This will occur until WyDOT installs a traffic signal at this intersection," Hermansky wrote.

Yet, because of the backup of cars, drivers likely will travel west on South Park Loop to use traffic lights at High School Road at the north intersection, or what's known as "Car Corner."

Hermansky said this pattern could cause more traffic to use the route than was stated in Teton Meadows' traffic study.

He also said there was no mention of construction of the Indian Springs Road connection to Highway 22.

Nancy Arkin with Verdone Landscape Architects said she will be responding to Hermansky's comments. One issue with his traffic counts is that he assumed all trips were generated from single-family homes, when in fact there also are apartments and townhomes in the neighborhood.

From a pathways standpoint, Brian Schilling, coordinator for Jackson Hole Community Pathways, said his staff "generally" finds the proposed bike and pedestrian amenities to be comprehensive.

Yet, Schilling said he would like Teton Meadows to grant a 20-foot-wide easement for the pathway traveling east to west on the southern end of the project.

"The proposed pathway should connect to the Melody Ranch Development on the east and the Rafter J subdivision on the north to facilitate non-motorized connections to the adjoining developments," Schilling wrote.

Though Teton Meadows is granting an 8-acre school site, the district still wants a detailed plan showing how schools could be impacted.

"This is a unique type of development that is not designed for second-home ownership," wrote Janine Teske, board chairwoman. "Therefore, the impact on Teton County schools will likely be significant."

The district also needs a detailed timeline showing the development's progression to forward to the State Facilities Commission to prepare for any school expansion plans. It is generally a six-year process with the commission from the time a community need is identified to the completion of a school, she wrote.

Nonetheless, the school district's primary challenge is teacher attraction and retention.

"Teton Meadows could provide a creative solution to the employee attraction and retention challenges that face the public entities if a certain percentage of the development was set aside for public employees," Teske wrote.