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Implementation will be key to success of Comp Plan

The input of several hundred Teton County residents on the “Character District Maps” has now been distilled into short descriptions of the future planned for each area of the county. Despite widespread skepticism about the Comp Plan process, these descriptions seem to have largely captured the ideas the public expressed. The “future character” of Jackson Hole sounds good, and the Comprehensive Plan is expected to be adopted in April 2012.

Does this mean we should all celebrate? Does this mean the Comp Plan will now preserve the wildlife, scenery, and community character of Jackson Hole? Not yet.

The latest draft of the Character District Maps provides a fairly detailed vision for the future, but it isn’t yet clear how we will actually implement this vision. Even if we do successfully create the development described by the maps, we don’t yet have clear information on what the real impacts would be if this vision becomes reality.

First of all, let’s look at what it will take to implement the vision illustrated by these maps. The Comp Plan policies and the accompanying Character District Maps are aspirational. They define goals for the future in increasing levels of detail. Achieving those goals will require extremely well-designed Land Development Regulations (LDRs), which will need to be developed over the next several years by experts in this specialized field. For example, the foundation of the Comp Plan is built on finding ways to shift development away from rural areas and wildlife habitat, and into more “appropriate areas” such as town. However, there is little consensus on how we might do this. Land use zoning will certainly be a component of any plan to shift development, but it is a temporary and limited tool. Zoning must be accompanied by a number of other regulations and incentives if we are serious about achieving the ambitious goals of permanent conservation that the community has laid out.

The Alliance strongly believes that a detailed implementation plan should be developed to define how meaningful progress will be made towards achieving the priorities of the community. Our elected officials have agreed that this is an important next step, and we hope to soon see a clear road map that illustrates how the Comp Plan will actually be implemented over the coming years, including budgets, timelines and responsible parties.

Next, what will actually happen to the wildlife, scenery and community character of Teton County if we develop in the way that the maps project? So far, this is not very clear. Although the maps show where growth is expected, and what type of development is desired, planners have not yet provided an estimate of the *amount* of growth expected in each character district. Without this vital data, it is very difficult to gauge whether the maps really do illustrate a significant shift of development, or determine how development might impact wildlife and traffic in each district. Good planning is typically based on clearly identifying the location, type and *amount* of development that is desired. So far we are two-thirds of the way there, and we strongly recommend that the plan finish the job by describing the amount of development planned for each district. Estimating the amount of projected development will enable analyses of the overall development pattern, and the impacts associated with this development. This information would also provide residents with a more complete understanding of the implications of the Comp Plan.

What can residents of Teton County do about all this? First, take a look at the Character District maps, available at www.jacksontetonplan.com. Next, read through the brief Conservation Alliance position on actions that we recommend before the Comp Plan is adopted this spring, available at www.jhalliance.org. If you have a smartphone, you can get a copy of the Alliance report by texting “Compplan” to 83432. Once you’re up to speed, please submit your own thoughts on the matter via the Comp Plan website.

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The Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance believes that the public should not support the adoption of the Comp Plan until we're very clear on how we will proceed to implement it, and not until we have a more detailed understanding of the expected impacts of the projected development.

Your continuing involvement for the next few months is critical. Please take the time to weigh in, as this is a plan for YOUR future, and for the future of generations to come.

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