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Changes needed before draft Comp Plan adopted

After more than four years of community effort, our elected officials intend to approve the policies of the Comprehensive Plan tonight, 5 to 9 p.m. at Snow King Resort's Grandview Lodge. Community members have consistently expressed their desire for a Comp Plan that prioritizes the protection of wildlife and natural resources, while managing growth in ways that enhance community character and quality of life. This is a good time to reflect on what this plan is likely to achieve, and where it may fall short of expectations.

In many ways the Comp Plan is on track towards excellence, but hasn't yet clearly defined how the plan will achieve overarching community goals, and instead has slated many key issues for further exploration. Consequently, the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance recently commissioned planning expert Alan Richman to conduct an independent technical analysis of the draft Comp Plan. Richman's analysis included many concrete recommendations for improvements, and highlighted several major policies that aren't yet as developed as they should be.

The professional planning staff should be commended for taking these recommendations very seriously. They have done everything within their limited authority to bring policies into greater alignment with the recommendations the public supported, and made a chart outlining which major recommendations they did not have the authority to address. Now, the remaining key policy decisions can only be directed by our elected officials.

Richman's analysis demonstrated that draft policies on growth management and land conservation are not as complete as they need to be. Richman recommended that elected officials commit to researching and incorporating growth management programs that proactively limit the rate of growth and the overall amount of growth, rather than just monitor and react to growth as the plan currently proposes. In addition, he recommended that the plan increase emphasis on permanent conservation of critical wildlife habitat in exchange for concentrating additional growth in developed areas. It is time for our elected officials to step up and commit to seriously studying and strengthening the weaknesses of the plan on the vital topics of growth management and land conservation.

In addition to the major policies that Richman recommended be further explored, the draft Comp Plan already includes a large number of policies that are slated for additional exploration. Researching the information needed to inform these policies will cost time and money, but this is critical to the overall success of the plan. Elected officials need to demonstrate their commitment to completing these studies by developing a multi-year action plan that defines how, when, and by whom these policy issues will be explored. This action plan should be formally adopted together with the final adoption of the Comp Plan, and sufficient resources must be designated for the completion of the action plan.

Despite their stated intent of leaving policies "fundamentally unchanged" after tonight, elected officials must clarify that upon completion of each of the studies identified, the Comp Plan will be adjusted as needed to better align with the findings of this research. Committing to explore key policies further without also agreeing to put the results of those studies into practice would be pointless.

This fall, the mapping phase of the planning process will begin. The policies that currently seem distant and abstract will appear much clearer once we see illustrations of how these policies will affect the future of every neighborhood of Jackson Hole. However, we cannot illustrate the community's vision on maps without meaningful public involvement.

The process in recent months has been almost completely inaccessible to the public, and seems almost designed to exclude meaningful public participation, especially from the working class residents that form the backbone of our community. Last Wednesday night the latest draft of the Comp Plan was released, and public comment was due by noon on Friday. (Not surprisingly, the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance submitted the only comments in this brief timeframe.) Clearly, this is not a fair process for the public to

participate at this extremely important juncture in the planning process. Yet elected officials have lamented that the public has not been more involved, and haven't always responded clearly to citizens who do speak up.

Tonight our elected representatives intend to approve broad policies for the future development of Jackson Hole, and they need to accept responsibility for a process that has failed to adequately engage and respond to the public in recent months. As we move on to mapping neighborhoods, we need to reconsider how to best involve the public in developing a plan for the future of our community. Every bit of public participation is valuable, and should be used to strengthen a plan that will profoundly impact us all.

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