

Jonathan Schechter “Corpus Callosum” Column
Jackson Hole News&Guide – June 4, 2008

This week, the consultants advising the town and county on the re-write of the Comp Plan are scheduled to release the draft “Themes and Policies” document, the piece which articulates the philosophy underlying the plan.

Several weeks ago, I reviewed a copy of the then-current draft. The following is the verbatim contents of the section entitled “The Community Vision,” the first section following the Introduction.

The vision is the broad statement that interlinks the topics within the plan.

Our vision is that Jackson and Teton County will preserve and balance our region’s natural environment, livability, and sense of community. By directing development to well-defined contiguous areas, growth can be organized in more efficient land use patterns; open lands and natural resources can be better protected; and public facilities and services can be delivered more effectively. With a finite supply of land, our community will provide for the region’s growth in a long-term, sustainable manner that balances growth, conservation, and community well-being.

As I’ve described before, I don’t like Vision Statements, primarily because, no matter how inspiring, they tend to be vague and, as a result, without any practical benefit. Among its many faults, this Vision Statement suffers from this vagueness problem, especially in its use of terms such as “balance” and “livability” and “community well-being.” Because such terms mean different things to different people, should such language be adopted, it’s easy to predict future battles-royale between developers and the government over whether a proposed project is sufficiently balanced, or truly livable, or adequately provides for the community’s well-being. Why set ourselves up for such problems?

Because I don’t like to criticize without offering a constructive alternative, I propose the following as a substitute for “The Community Vision.”

The foundation of this plan is a Statement of Ideal.

A Statement of Ideal combines the inspirational quality of a Vision Statement with a practical tool for determining whether day-to-day actions are helping achieve that vision.

The Statement of Ideal for this plan is:

Teton County will have viable populations of all native species, and preserve all natural scenic vistas.

In essence, this statement means that, in all they do, Teton County and the Town of Jackson will evaluate whether a given action preserves scenic vistas, or makes it more or less likely that the Tetons region will have viable populations of all native species. Those actions that preserve scenic vistas or make viable populations more likely will be encouraged; those which harm such vistas or make viable populations less likely will be discouraged.

Like a Vision Statement, a Statement of Ideal is not a mandate; it does not require the town or county to take any particular action. Instead, like all Vision Statements, this Statement of Ideal establishes a fundamental guiding principle for all actions taken by the Town and County. However, unlike any Vision Statement, this Statement of Ideal also provides the community with a tool for judging those actions.

On its surface, this Statement of Ideal may sound like a wild-eyed environmental mandate. It is not. Instead, it is built upon the reality that Teton County's extraordinary natural resources are the foundation of the town's and county's economy, quality of life, and sense of community.

Put another way, this plan seeks to sustain four fundamental qualities: natural environment, economy, quality of life, and sense of community. Of these, only sustaining natural resources is absolutely imperative to sustaining the other three.

Teton County lies in the center of the largest generally-intact ecosystem in the contiguous United States. Historically, because visitors have been so attracted to the region's extraordinary natural environment – its landscape and wildlife; its national parks and forests – the county has enjoyed a prosperous tourism economy. More recently, in increasing numbers, individuals have moved to Teton County for not just its setting, but for the sense of community that has grown up around Teton County's heritage (in particular its appreciation for, and close interactions with, its natural environment). In turn, these new residents have helped turn Teton County into one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, and made it the economic hub of the southern Tetons region.

Sustaining economic vitality, high quality of life, and strong sense of community are of tremendous importance to the town and county, and therefore are integral to this plan. However, by adopting the Statement of Ideal as the foundation of its Land Use Plan, the Town and County also recognize three long-term realities about the relationship between the county's natural environment and the other three key qualities:

- By sustaining its environmental quality, Teton County will, in turn, sustain the foundation of the other critical qualities so important to past and current residents. In particular, if it sustains its natural environment, Teton County will have the opportunity to continue to enjoy economic vitality, a high quality of life, and a strong sense of community. Conversely, without a healthy natural environment, the other three qualities will be placed in extreme peril. For none of the other three qualities is this same cause-and-effect relationship true.
- As the nation and world become increasingly populated and developed, natural environments are becoming increasingly degraded. By sustaining its natural environment, Teton County will enjoy an increasingly-rare quality, one which will ensure its future economic health.
- Teton County's forebears bequeathed to current residents a healthy ecosystem. In turn, this generation of Teton County residents has a moral obligation to sustain that conservation legacy for future generations. We can meet that obligation – and our other economic and social goals as well – by maintaining our scenic vistas and viable populations of all native species.

So that's what I'd advocate making the foundation of our new Comp Plan. Whether we choose to do so is, of course, anyone's guess. But I put forth this proposal for three reasons.

First, surveys conducted in conjunction with the comp plan update show that the community's highest priority is preserving wildlife habitat and wildlife migration corridors. Making this Statement of Ideal the foundation of the plan is the clearest possible way of incorporating this sentiment into the plan.

Second, the Statement of Ideal's clarity will make future planning easier for all involved. Developers, planners, government, and the public alike will all benefit by knowing what can – and can't – be done, and why. Far better to have such clarity and then make exceptions than to start with an ambiguous plan and have to add

clarity.

Third, as I wrote about in my last column, I recently attended a conference on “international amenity migration.” More than anything else, the conference drove home to me how “nice” communities around the world are struggling to address the same fundamental issue facing Jackson Hole: how can people and nature not just co-exist, but thrive?

As much as we may be like other communities, two things distinguish Jackson Hole. One is that the quality of our environment is remarkably high and remarkably non-degraded. The other is that we’ve done a pretty good job – better than almost anywhere else – in finding a way to allow both people and nature to thrive.

However, given the growth pressures we will continue to face, it’s not clear to me whether “pretty good” will continue to cut it. Instead, it seems to me that allowing both people and nature to thrive will require us to think in new, different, and better ways about how we use our land. While traditional vision statements have merit, they are clearly not new, different, or better. A statement of ideal is. Further, by making a statement of ideal the foundation of our plan, Jackson Hole can be to future generations of planners and developers what Yellowstone became to future generations of conservationists: a model for a new, different, and better way of using land. That’s the opportunity our comp plan update offers us; with luck, we’ll choose to seize it.