

E D I T O R I A L

Create board for environment

The death of Jackson Hole will not come suddenly. There will be no smoking gun, no Professor Plum in the dining room with a candlestick. Instead, as many have noted, layers of development, poor decision making by government and increased traffic will inflict the 1,000 cuts that will ultimately result in the valley's character-defining environment dying a slow, only-visible-in-hindsight death. When that death comes, the very things that make the valley unique, the wildlife and relatively protected landscape, will be but memories. Then Jackson Hole will suffer its greatest recession. Who will endure the long winters, suffer the travel delays to come to a valley that is the shell of its once-grand self?

The often myopic outlook that guides valley decision making – exemplified by the recent planning decisions driven by economic concerns – show that the valley, more than ever, needs an environmental commission to help elected officials make decisions using the best available science. When the valley concludes the rewrite of the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan, such a commission must be a bulwark of the effort. As currently envisioned, the commission will consist of a volunteer panel of scientists tasked with helping to develop an inventory of the valley's ecosystem, identify areas that need further study and make recommendations to elected officials to guide policy and planning. Clearly, elected officials will have to create a well-defined charter and role for the commission so it is not hijacked by special interests.

Such hazards, however, should not dissuade the people of Jackson Hole from wanting to have a body that looks at the entire ecosystem and scientifically measures human impact and natural forces to help inform decision makers. The valley has a board guiding the Teton County Fair and the Teton County Library, and elected officials are finalizing a body to oversee energy use in the valley. Those are all important organizations with missions that meet valley needs.

In Jackson Hole, in the center of a mostly intact temperate ecosystem, shouldn't the valley have a body that has as its primary focus the environment? Isn't protecting the elk, streams, fish and their habitat the best possible business decision this valley could ever make? Town and county leaders, who have shown a willingness to embrace sustainability and focus on character, must find common ground and create an environmental commission. No one knows how many cuts Jackson Hole has endured, but it is time to start counting.