



Comp Plan 2011

The hardest decisions are yet to come...

By **Trevor Stevenson**, *Alliance Executive Director*

The Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance was founded more than three decades ago to ensure that our community plans responsibly for the future. The new Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan will have more impact on that future than any other document, and consequently it has been a primary focus of our work.

The quality of our community's Comp Plan will determine the legacy we leave for future generations. If we succeed in creating an excellent plan, it will also provide a positive example for the millions of visitors who come to admire the beauty of Jackson Hole, and who may be inspired by our thriving community existing in harmony with a spectacular environment.

Since the start of the Comp Plan revision process in 2007, every resident of Jackson Hole has had the opportunity to advocate for the plan to include policies to uphold their priorities. Most people who commented have consistently asked for policies that will protect wildlife, preserve open spaces, and wisely manage any future growth in our valley.

The evolution of this plan has benefitted from the incredible effort and dedication of residents, elected officials, planning commissioners, town and county staff, numerous consultants and a number of community organizations. The Alliance's expert staff members have dedicated years of hard work to providing relevant research and concrete suggestions for improvement.

Progress made

Although the lengthy revision process has been frustrating at times, it has also generated clear direction on what the plan should achieve, and we're encouraged to see progress toward accomplishing the community's goals. Thanks to everyone's efforts, your elected representatives have pledged that the final Comp Plan will:

- Honor the community's directive that future growth should be limited to existing development entitlements.
- Include a growth management program to evaluate the amount, location, type and impacts of development as it occurs.
- Incorporate "Character District Maps" in the plan, so we'll know what future development will look like.
- Develop a system to monitor cumulative impacts on wildlife.

A new draft of the policies section of the Comp Plan was released on May 20. The electeds say they won't implement this section until the character district maps are finished. But they do intend to adopt it on June 29, if they believe the policies are truly complete, so your involvement in this phase of public comment is extremely important.

Outstanding questions

Based on our preliminary review, the Alliance has two major concerns regarding the newest draft:

First, it's evident that the new draft plan has policies that are broad, general and sometimes vague. A number of critical issues are not yet fully resolved within the plan, although it does mention that officials intend to further consider these issues and address them in some of the next phases of the planning process.

To avert conflicts down the road, we urge the elected officials to make as many of the major decisions as possible now, so that these are clearly reflected in the policies section of the new plan.

A good Comp Plan needs to be clear about its major goals, and its policies must be explicit and strong enough to ensure those goals are met, and to provide guidance for the character district maps and the land development regulations to follow. In this case, the Alliance believes that the electeds need to clearly outline how they will address all of these important and potentially controversial issues in the future. Our elected officials need to clarify exactly how, when and by whom the important details will be resolved.

Our second overarching concern regarding the new draft is that it does not include strong enough mechanisms to ensure that:

- Development will be shifted to appropriate places, and
- Permanent protection of open space will be a requirement of these shifts.

One of the core principles of the Comp Plan is that our community wants to decrease development in rural areas of the county, especially in places with critical wildlife habitat, and permanently protect sensitive areas and our unique rural character. To counterbalance a decrease in development potential in rural areas of the county, the electeds say the plan aims to increase development potential in already existing "complete neighborhoods."

Good things included in the draft:

- Clear narrative outlining our community's priorities – the protection of wildlife and natural resources in our unique valley
- Commitment to managed growth
- Inter-related themes and values
- “Better not bigger” development philosophy
- Language expressing intentions to update the Natural Resources Overlay, and to respect wildlife habitat and corridors
- A policy stating the intention to understand and monitor cumulative impacts
- Language recognizing the value of clean air and water
- Acknowledgment that a healthy ecosystem is our most important economic asset

Some suggestions for improvement:

- Include strong enough mechanisms to ensure that development potential will be shifted out of rural areas and into areas where growth is appropriate
- Include explicit tradeoffs that spell out exactly how allowing increased density in some areas will be linked to lower development potential and permanent protection in rural areas
- Include assurances that such shifts will not degrade the character of the areas where increased density will be allowed
- Include timelines and specifics for addressing all the major topics raised in the draft, such as transfer of development rights programs, updating the Natural Resources Overlay, a mechanism for funding conservation easements, updating planning tools and standards, etc.
- Increase commitment to key topics beyond statements that they'll be “explored”
- Increase the focus on policies that will result in the permanent protection of open space
- Prioritize strategies to be implemented
- Include additional indicators, so we'll know if the plan is working or not
- Include a more detailed context of Jackson Hole as a unique gateway community as a basis for the frameworks for growth management and “Complete Neighborhoods”

However, actually accomplishing this goal will require explicit tradeoffs that spell out how allowing increased density in some areas will be linked to lower development potential and permanent protection in rural areas. The new draft still doesn't provide the strong policies and regulatory mechanisms necessary to achieve its desired results.

Again, we need our elected officials to clarify exactly how they expect to achieve this challenging goal, because it is central to the success of the plan as a whole. We encourage you to read our preceding special section on Saving Open Spaces for some ideas about how our community could approach this.

Our role

The Alliance considers the adoption of an effective Comp Plan to be a top priority, so we will continue to work hard on this critical issue. In addition to the in-depth analysis and involvement of our staff, we are working closely with Alan Richman, an independent consultant who specializes in these issues, and we are grateful for support from Save Historic Jackson Hole and from citizens who have helped us hire this widely respected expert. We intend to post Richman's independent analysis in early June, and we urge you to check our website then to read his evaluation of what issues still need improvement within the plan.

We'll also be publishing the Alliance's recommendations online, and will offer the electeds and planners suggestions to further refine and strengthen Comp Plan policies as this process continues.

The Alliance will also continue to advocate for effective public involvement in the upcoming phases of the planning process, and we'll provide you with the latest information to help you have the most impact on key issues. Meanwhile, we are assisting with much of the technical research needed to inform each phase of planning.

Please stay involved during the critical next phases of the Comp Plan revision process.

See the sidebar at right for upcoming opportunities for participation, and check www.jacksontetonplan.com and www.jhalliance.org/allianceaction.htm for updated information on the process and our suggestions for how you can make positive contributions to the future of Jackson Hole. ■

WHAT'S NEXT?

Since many of the important decisions with regard to land use policies have been left to be determined in upcoming discussions regarding the character district map section of the Comp Plan, your continued involvement is critical.

Below is a tentative schedule of relevant dates:

Through June 6: Planning staff is offering a series of open houses on the new draft. See www.jacksontetonplan.com for meeting times and locations.

June 7: 5 to 9 p.m., Comp Plan Joint Information Meeting #9, Grandview Lodge at Snow King Resort. The draft plan will be presented and public comments taken. The process for coming up with the character district maps may be discussed.

June 15: Noon to 1 p.m., Alliance Info Lunch on the new draft Comp Plan, 685 S. Cache St.

June 29: 5 to 9 p.m., Comprehensive Plan JIM #10, Grandview Lodge at Snow King Resort. Staff will present the draft once again, highlighting recent changes, and public comment will again be taken. The electeds intend to adopt the policies section, if it's ready.

July through December: The character district maps are tentatively set to be devised and reviewed.

After December 2011: Once the entire Comp Plan has been formally adopted, the process of updating the town and county land development regulations will begin.

Check www.jacksontetonplan.com for details. This website is also where you can submit written public comments at any time.

Visit www.jhalliance.org for links to all of our “Comp Plan Uncomplicated” radio shows that are airing on Jackson Hole's community station KHOL (89.1 FM) every Wednesday at 4 p.m.



Show your support for the Alliance's work on the Comprehensive Plan by purchasing one of our limited-edition Comp Plan coffee mugs! Your payment of \$20 (or more if you'd like to add a donation) gets you a mug with custom artwork, and all proceeds go toward continuing our efforts for a good plan. Visit www.jhalliance.org/join.htm for details.