



February 24, 2010

Board of Teton County Commissioners, Mayor Barron and Jackson Town Council  
cc: Jeff Daugherty, Tyler Sinclair, Amy Kuszak

Dear Teton County Commissioners, Mayor Barron and Jackson Town Council,

On behalf of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance, we would like to submit comments regarding the Environment Commission, including the proposals of both the planning staff and Board Chairman Phibbs.

The Alliance is in complete agreement with the fundamental assertion behind both staff's and Chairman Phibbs' proposals, that policymaking should be informed by the best available science and information. We believe that a formally enabled Environment Commission with a broad scope and mandate and the ability to identify and recommend research priorities is the most appropriate implementation of this goal moving forward.

An Environment Commission – as thoroughly outlined by staff, and as proposed in a Nov. 2008 memo from the Sustaining Jackson Hole Environment Group and in the draft Comprehensive Plan (released April, 2009) – would be charged with gaining an ecosystem-wide, comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the decisions that we are making today, as well as with identifying future research priorities. At a relatively small cost to the Town and County, this Commission would be an excellent resource for decision makers in the creation of policies that reflect both the unique values of our community and our ecosystem, while also being responsive to the ever-evolving nature of scientific research and knowledge. While budgeting is always challenging, particularly during a recession, commitment of financial resources should be in alignment with community priorities, and this has been identified as a priority.

**One of the most important features of staff's proposed Environment Commission was that the commission itself would have the responsibility to set the research priorities. This follows the understanding that, as experts in their fields, they would be more equipped for this job than perhaps others.** Making the Environment Commission an independent body composed of a variety of experts from a variety of fields whose research priorities are not determined by who is in office at the time depoliticizes the process as much as possible.

This commission would serve in an advisory capacity, like other advisory boards to the elected officials, presenting their opinions for final decision making by the elected bodies. Advisory boards exist for a variety of topics, such as the Energy Efficiency Advisory Board, and because the Environment Commission would focus on ecosystem-wide research and comprehensive policy applications rather than project-by-project analyses, it would not add another layer to the planning process.

We see ecosystem-wide research as augmenting the current system of site-specific analysis. Site-specific analysis will always be essential in increasing our understanding of our ecosystem and in creating effective public policy. Coupled with a more

comprehensive, cumulative look at the impacts of our development decisions on the health of the ecosystem over space and time, these piecemeal projects become even more valuable. Analyzing the indirect, “downstream” impacts of our decisions will lead to an increased understanding of the environment that we live in and a better ability to plan for our community’s future. **We cannot afford to make irreparable mistakes with our wildlife and natural resources. As such, Commissioner Phibbs’ proposal, which is less comprehensive and more project-specific, is simply not an acceptable substitute for the original proposal for an Environment Commission.**

The community has consistently voiced that its priority is the protection of wildlife and natural resources. This is reflected in the draft Comprehensive Plan in many ways, not least of all the proposed Environment Commission. The original proposal for this commission, which was the result of not only the Comprehensive Plan language, but the efforts of a group of community members, is clearly in line with public sentiment. Many officials recognize this. However, despite clear prioritization of wildlife and natural resource protection, the ability of an Environment Commission to uphold this priority, and the enthusiastic response from many in the community, there is still some resistance on the part of some of the elected officials. This is a bit concerning as the Comprehensive Plan is passed from the planning commissions to the elected officials. If something that brings to bear such clearly documented public sentiment stands to be so significantly weakened and faces such resistance, what can be expected throughout the Comprehensive Plan review process moving forward?

In closing, the Conservation Alliance strongly believes that the creation of an Environment Commission is a critical next step in increasing our community’s understanding of our unique ecosystem. The best available science should drive public policy, particularly in Jackson and Teton County, where our wildlife, open spaces and natural resources are our most prized community assets. After six months of discussion, we hope that the elected officials will enable this commission sooner than later.

Thank you for your attention on this important effort to improve natural resource protection policies. We hope that you will continue to prioritize the creation of an Environment Commission that meets the originally intended objectives. Feel free to contact us with any questions.

Sincerely,



Kristy Bruner  
Community Planning Director



Cynthia Harger  
Interim Executive Director