



Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance
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Make sure Comp Plan protects wildlife

Will Jackson and Teton County officials protect Jackson Hole's future, as strong majorities of residents have asked them to do? In a representative democracy, the most fundamental part of an elected or appointed official's job is to represent their community. Nowhere is the will of this community stronger and clearer than on the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan.

In public surveys, two scientific polls, direct input to planners, two previous town ballot initiatives, and letters to local newspapers, an overwhelming percentage of valley residents indicated their desire to:

- (1) permanently protect wildlife and open space, and establish the public funding sources and other mechanisms needed to accomplish this,
- (2) responsibly manage and determine a carrying capacity limit to growth, and
- (3) provide more housing for our workforce.

This is what the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance works for with the help of more than 2,000 members. Most residents and visitors recognize an obligation to work hard to protect this heritage. We know we are privileged to experience this unique ecosystem that supports such magnificent wildlife.

Our community is inextricably linked to the landscape that we share. Decisions about how we grow will deeply affect the quality of our lives here, our visitors' enjoyment, and the lives of our wildlife neighbors. We cannot afford to make mistakes.

Private land, while only 3% of the county, includes almost 50% of the critical winter range for keystone species such as deer and moose, and summer nesting sites for a majority of our region's bird species including bald eagles and trumpeter swans. Every acre lost in the valley means less nesting habitat and crucial winter food resources for wildlife.

Few documents will play as critical a role in Jackson Hole's future as the new Comprehensive Plan. It has already received considerable work over the past two years. Unfortunately, the April 2009 draft seriously strayed from the mandate to update our 1994 plan in ways reflecting new information and the majority's clearly articulated priorities. Despite questions from many community members, town and county planners still have not yet explained why this promised update became a rewrite that removed existing protections. By publicly acknowledging what went wrong, and affirming that they share their constituents' goal of preserving Jackson Hole's natural assets as their first priority, they could build trust in the process and make it more efficient.

Looking forward, the Plan now needs to preserve and protect why we value this valley: the ecosystem, natural resources, and unique community character. Jackson Hole's future needs to evolve out of our strong conservation principles, the best available science, and a high level of caution when this science is not readily available. Not only are our wildlife and landscapes themselves intrinsically important, they also define and support our identity, community character, and economy.

Specifically, this plan needs to address the following issues in order to protect Jackson Hole's future, wildlife and open space:

- Ensure that permanently protecting wildlife, wildlife habitat and wildlife movement corridors and connectivity is the top priority throughout Teton County, and the primary factor in all land use decisions.
- Establish limits on build-out for the town and county, and firm limits to overall growth, to ensure that we will never exceed our carrying capacity.
- Promote a sustainable economy that does not depend on population growth.
- Figure out where we stand now. Good planning requires accurate baseline data on important planning issues, including: our summer and winter populations, existing number of residences and commercial space, precise existing development allowances, and projected population growth.

- Have decisions made based on the total cumulative impact of proposed developments.
- Direct that future growth must fund all its infrastructure and community costs. County residents should not be forced to subsidize growth through higher infrastructure or utility costs, as we are now.
- Promote long-term workforce housing solutions.
- Prohibit all new resorts and expansions of existing resorts.
- Incorporate realistic transportation objectives to reduce wildlife mortality: limit creation of new roads and widening of existing ones, and lower nighttime speed limits.
- Protect Jackson's small-town character by limiting the scale of developments while providing for appropriate infill in vacant lots.
- Incorporate policies that promote energy conservation and efficiency.

By providing new mechanisms for public funding and development we can protect this valley while respecting private landowners, who also love the land. Together, we can fairly share the cost of land protection that benefits us all.

These specific requirements are not arbitrary or excessive. These measures are simply the necessary steps to completing a responsible Comprehensive Plan that will preserve our extraordinary community and the natural values that Jackson Hole's residents value so highly.

Paul Hansen, Executive Director
Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance