

Planning tool helps conserve habitat

Guest Shot / By Steve Kallin Nov 8, 2017

Conservation. Preservation. Wildlife.

The Jackson Hole community has consistently placed a high value on the protection of wildlife and preservation of open spaces. From the very first homesteaders who acted as responsible stewards of this land, to legendary conservationists and wildlife advocates who protected large swaths of this valley, to the leaders who collaborated on the 2012 Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan, Jackson residents have walked the walk when it comes to conserving land and protecting wildlife.

Our scenic vistas, water resources and incredible wildlife are second to none. In our collective role as stewards of this land we have the responsibility to ensure development is accomplished in a wise and prudent manner in order to safeguard these treasures for future generations.

Teton County commissioners will soon consider a clarification to the use of the floor area option for noncontiguous tracts of land. This planning tool allows the voluntary transfer of rural development rights from one parcel to another. This is significant to the future conservation of Teton County because it will enable and incentivize potential development to be moved from areas with high environmental value, such as critical wildlife habitat or high-priority open space, to areas with lower natural resource values. Those high-priority tracts would then be permanently protected from development through a conservation easement. The end result would be that 10 percent of the total acreage of a project could be developed and 90 percent would be permanently conserved.

The Comprehensive Plan provides a method for establishing which parcels are “higher value” than others through environmental analysis. Our land development regulations require this analysis whenever any transfer tool is used in rural parcels. If there is no evidence that one parcel has a higher natural resource value over the other, such a transfer would not be recommended by planning staff under the floor area option.

This useful tool of transferring noncontiguous development rights was used in 2015. It transferred density out of critical mule deer habitat to a private property parcel adjacent to Teton Village. By transferring the development rights to a noncontiguous parcel bordering an already developed area, our planning staff and county commissioners prioritized wildlife and permanently protected habitat and scenic views for future generations.

The Jackson Hole Classical Academy has a forthcoming proposal to use the floor area option and a noncontiguous transfer to permanently protect from residential development over 130 acres of land adjacent to the Bridger-Teton National Forest and the National Elk Refuge. It also plans to preserve as open space an additional 23 acres east of South Park Loop Road.

As a former manager of the National Elk Refuge, I can speak firsthand on how extremely valuable this land can be for our winter elk population, which continues to increase on the refuge. Elk, Jackson Hole’s signature wildlife species, have become too concentrated on the refuge and need to spread out, especially during harsh winters, because disease is transmitted more easily and the health of the herd is diminished when the animals are concentrated. If this adjacent acreage is developed, then the possibility of conserving this land goes away forever and wildlife disturbance will increase. We have an obligation to incentivize the protection of high-value, critical wildlife habitat like this in our valley.

Ranching families — some of our biggest landowners in the valley — and their way of life can be protected by using this tool. By incentivizing the conservation of open spaces we are providing tools which can be used to support ranching in Teton County.

Our Western heritage, highlighted in the Comprehensive Plan as something our community strongly values, can be preserved through the floor area option. Incentives for conservation and the transfer of development rights provide a way to keep our ranch lands as open space and to keep ranching operations in our valley.

These ranching families have protected our valley and our Wyoming heritage for over 100 years, and we need to ensure that we provide them with LDRs and tools that will allow them to continue ranching in future generations.

Our community wants predictability. However, the only way land has complete predictability is when it is placed in a conservation easement. Our community also highly values wildlife, open space and conservation. We must couple all of these together to achieve the best possible outcome for our valley. The use of the tool to transfer the floor area will receive full public reviews for any institutional use through the conditional use permit process.

Encouraging and incentivizing voluntary conservation through thoughtful planning and our LDRs will help ensure that critical wildlife habitat, scenic vistas and Jackson Hole's ranching heritage are protected and preserved for future generations.

Steve Kallin served as manager of the National Elk Refuge from 2007 to 2016. Guest Shots are solely the opinion of their authors.