

Jackson Hole News&Guide e-edition**Title : GUEST SHOT Folks want predictability in land plan****Author : Louis Wang****Location :****Article Date : 09/14/2011**

Folks want predictability in land plan

This week, elected officials begin finalizing the last section of the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan rewrite — the character district mapping process is now under way. Members of the Jackson Hole community have consistently said they want more “predictability” in the new plan. What happens in the next few months will determine the success of the plan. If the character district maps provide that promised predictability, we will have a good plan by one important measure.

The policies in the new plan have been written in an intentionally vague style to provide “flexibility.” Detail and specificity are to be provided in the character districts chapter (formerly called the future land use plan). So this last section takes on a central role in guiding future development and land use in Jackson Hole for decades to come.

At no time in the process has it been more critical to pay attention, get involved and voice your opinion. It is particularly crucial given the large number of questions the plan rewrite process was intended to answer but so far does not. Detail, specificity, the nitty-gritty of what individual neighborhoods will look like in the future have been delayed until now.

First and foremost, a comprehensive plan should represent what is most important to the community. In addition, the plan must be a forward-looking document that gives folks a high level of certainty of what their neighborhoods and districts will look like.

For many years, community members have pressed elected officials to ensure the new plan brings increased predictability to future development decisions. This public sensitivity is understandable, as some very large, character-changing land-use proposals have been seriously entertained in the past. Our current approval process does not allow public participation until major details of a new project are largely decided. No one wants to pick up the newspaper and learn their neighborhood is being turned upside down.

When residents in South Park discovered a development initiative was under way to place 500 homes on land zoned for 50, they were understandably upset. This case in point, and others like it, is why predictability is such a hot issue. Most of the new plan is already approved, and if the planning process was to stop, now we would have moved backward. The 1994 plan provided more predictability than what is currently penned into the portion of our new plan that is already approved.

We hope for a successful outcome. The last portion of the plan, the character district maps, has the potential to provide needed detail and specificity and, therefore, lend predictability to the overall plan. If successful, it will provide a clear picture of future development patterns and densities, including the development potential that has already been approved but not yet built.

Jackson Hole residents, neighborhood by neighborhood, deserve to know the answer to a simple question: How will my neighborhood change under the new plan? If the character district maps answer that question in an easily understood fashion, we will have achieved an important measure of success. If they don't, we will have moved backward and largely wasted five years and a whole lot of money on nice words and pictures that are impressive but do not meet the needs of the community.

A second major objective of the “update” was to resolve some of the conflicts, contradictions and vagueness of the 1994 plan. While the policies have done a good job of describing some key common values of our community, and even state that predictability is desired, the overall ambiguity of the policies has actually increased. This is not good. Without clear statements now in the character district section, elected officials will necessarily fill this void and essentially create policy themselves on a real-time, case-by-case basis. This unfortunate outcome would not reduce the conflicts inherent in the 1994 plan, and we hope for a better outcome.

History shows that vagueness has not served the community well. Whether it was contentious project-by-project debates during the application process, or approved projects that were out of character or did not end up providing a net community benefit, the price for vagueness has been too high. To avoid this scenario in the future, our character district maps need to clarify and provide definition to the policies in a way that respects community vision.

We are all fortunate to live in this magnificent place we call Jackson Hole. We have dedicated citizens who care about our future. If our elected officials show leadership now and provide the predictability they have promised, we will have a plan that will serve us well. Save Historic Jackson Hole hopes for a good outcome from this final step in our long planning process.

GUEST SHOT*Louis Wang*

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