SHJH Save Historic Jackson Hole

The other side of the story...

Holding developers accountable

Note the time and date: It was a historic moment to be sure.

On October 16, just past 4pm, town councilman Don Frank uttered a truly profound statement. Something that, if only heeded decades earlier, could have helped Jackson Hole avoid its current housing crunch.

"Suggesting that a 'fee-in-lieu-of' is actually going to park a car is not realistic," Frank said during a recent town workshop. "It's just going to be money. That doesn't park any car."

Developers need to better mitigate their impacts.

It was a momentous response to a proposition by housing czar April Norton who suggested a developer at 174 N. King could simply write a small check instead of creating real parking spots. Norton thought a $50,000 fee-in-lieu per spot would go a long way toward creating a future parking garage.

The idea is wrought with so many problems it's difficult to find a starting point. First, we already have a parking garage that no one uses. Second, there is no new parking structure being considered. So the money would end up going to government via the new housing department, and all those fees would simply be banked.

Finally, the biggest problem with allowing developers a financial "out" for mitigating their housing and parking impacts is: It doesn't work. It never has.

For decades, the Town of Jackson has failed to hold developers responsible for the additional housing and traffic impacts their projects generate. The current mitigation rate of just 25% is far too low. In other mountain resort towns it is as high as 80%.

When the 99-room hotel/restaurant/bank was approved for Center Street in April, Mayor Pete Muldoon said he wished mitigation rates were higher, especially for larger projects like that one.

Muldoon doesn't have to 'wish.' He's the mayor. He's in a position to affect real change.

A strong argument could be made for 100% mitigation, meaning a developer must house every year-round employee they need to run their hotel or restaurant or bank, not just one out of every four peak season college kids or J1 summer employees as we have now.

And providing for impacts does not mean a fee-in-lieu. For decades, the town's policy has been to allow developers to pay their way out of actually building housing for their employees. That "fee" has been so pitifully low, guess what happened? No housing ever got built.

Pocket change is collected by the housing department from developers who never want to be bothered with building affordable housing. This money has never been enough to actually buy or build anything. It's basically just paid department salaries and overhead.

We applaud Councilman Frank and Mayor Muldoon, they're getting it. Mitigation rates need to be raised, a lot. The notion that a fee-in-lieu is a tangible place to sleep at night is a con job. We need to stop pretending.

"The immediate reality is money doesn't build housing… and money doesn't create parking…" Frank said.

We couldn't agree more.

Save Historic Jackson Hole is a tax deductible 501 (c)(3) non-profit. PO Box 8205, Jackson WY 83002