

# Land trust advocates carrots before sticks

To encourage conservation easements, new comprehensive plan should include density bonus for clustering, group says.

By Kevin Huelsmann

Members of the Jackson Hole Land Trust are encouraging Jackson and Teton County officials to rely on incentives as they try to decrease development in wildlife habitat and open spaces.

Offering their first public comment on the rewrite of the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan since 2009, trust officials said town and county planners should rely less on downzoning rural areas and more on encouraging property owners to create conservation easements to strip development potential from their land.

"If you want something other than one unit per 35 acres in the rural area, the only way to get it is through incentives," land trust executive director Laurie Andrews and board president Pete Lawton said in a letter sent to town and county officials.

The rewrite of the plan currently calls for the reduction of development potential in the rural parts of the county and says that "tools will be explored to transfer development potential" from outlying parts of the county to already-developed areas.

Elected officials have not provided any details about how exactly they plan to achieve either of those goals, although downzoning is one of the primary options.

Andrews and Lawton did not specifically criticize the latest iteration of the comprehensive plan, but offered advice from their organization's decades of conservation experience.

"In our experience, the best way to conserve meaningful open space is through incentives," the two land trust officials said in the letter. "This is how we work — in a market-based environment, with willing land-

owners. Setting aside the question of fairness, because of the base density rights that private landowners possess, we think it is impossible for this community to zone its way to strategic, high-quality open space."

They also stressed the importance of getting conservation easements on small pieces of land, saying town and county officials need to maintain tools that can help conserve open space on a smaller scale.

"Done thoughtfully, the conservation of smaller parcels both complements the protection of adjacent, larger parcels and over time can develop into a pattern of conservation that is greater than the sum of its parts," they wrote.

Andrews and Lawton pointed out that the county's planned residential development tool, which allows landowners to develop denser projects in return for conserving open space, is the "only meaningful incentive for conservation on parcels smaller than 70 acres."

In 2009, land trust officials called for town and county planners to add provisions to the comprehensive plan that would establish a permanent funding source to pay for land conservation and maintain some development rights in the rural parts of the county that could be used as bargaining chips in conservation efforts. They also suggested creating tools and incentives that would allow landowners to transfer their development rights and cluster new development on their property.

The comments submitted by trust officials were part of a small influx of letters and emails sent to town and county staff during the last several weeks.

Though many large, influential organizations submitted comments when an earlier version of the comprehensive plan was released several years ago, many of the groups have been noticeably absent from the review process in recent months, with the exception of Save Historic Jackson Hole and the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance.

The land trust's comments come just as town and county officials are readying their final review of the comprehensive plan, which is expected to serve as the foundation for new land-use rules in coming years.

## Upcoming meeting

Jackson and Teton County planning commissioners on Thursday are scheduled to take up their final review of a long-term land-use plan for the valley.

Members of the two groups are set to convene at 5 p.m. Thursday at Snow King Resort's Grandview Lodge.

Planning commissioners are expected to review the final changes to the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Plan and suggest any last-minute revisions. Planning staff said they expect planning commissioners will reconvene in coming weeks to adopt the document.

The land-use plan will then be taken up by elected officials in March for one last review.

A full agenda is available at [www.jacksontetonplan.com](http://www.jacksontetonplan.com) or at the town and county planning departments.

During the past several weeks, numerous residents have raised concerns about plans to allow more residential development on pieces of land near The Aspens. Earlier this month, a group of west bank landowners created a group to fight plans to allow more homes to be built along Moose-Wilson road.

"I would like to invite those persons who are pushing for more development to please write their desires here ... because I did not hear the voices at the meetings I attended," longtime Aspens resident Sherrie Jern said in an email to county planning staff. "I heard neighbors wanting to retain the quality of their neighborhoods, to protect wildlife and a way of life."

Members of the alliance and Save Historic Jackson Hole continue to press elected officials to discuss the amount of development they expect in specific areas of the valley.

"The plan must include building and density numbers," Save Historic Jackson Hole executive director Armond Aciri said in a list of suggested changes he sent to town and county officials. "A plan without metrics isn't a real plan."