

**Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column**  
**Jackson Hole News&Guide – February 10, 2010**

Today’s column is adapted from a letter I sent last week to County Commission chair Hank Phibbs, along with his fellow commissioners and members of the town council. It was co-written by Doug Wachob, PhD, a wildlife biologist with extensive experience working in the Tetons region and similar ecosystems.

We wrote to share some reactions to the environment task force proposal Chairman Phibbs made at the February 1 JIM meeting. For the sake of clarity, we refer to the body he proposed as the “Environmental Issue Task Force.”

Our reactions were based on our belief that the primary reason for creating any environmental advisory body is to ensure that environmental policy makers are able to inform their decisions with the best available science. Breaking this goal into its constituent parts, it means combining good politics with good environmental science.

Our concern is that, while the “Environmental Issue Task Force” may be good politics, it fails in the other half of the equation – providing policy makers with the best available environmental science.

While there are a number of reasons for this shortcoming, from an environmental science perspective, the biggest single reason underlying Teton County’s gulf between environmental science and environmental policy-making is the lack of a “30,000 foot” understanding of the area’s many ecosystems and their interrelationships. Currently, studies are done on a piecemeal basis, and no individual or organization systematically identifies what we know, what we don’t know, and how the extant and missing pieces of information fit together. As a result, neither scientists nor, by extension, policy makers have access to such big-picture tools as a comprehensive vegetation map of the county, or such big-picture analyses as an understanding of cumulative impacts.

Unfortunately, as we understand the concept, an “Environmental Issue Task Force” will only perpetuate the extant piecemeal approach to environmental information gathering and analysis. In so doing, it will not address the need for the “big picture” perspective.

That this “big picture” perspective is both missing and important is reflected throughout the current draft of the comp plan. For example, consider *Theme 1: Promote Stewardship of Wildlife and Natural Resources*. Principle 1.1 of Theme 1 – the first and foremost principle in the plan’s first and foremost theme – notes that “Direct and indirect human impacts in Jackson Hole and surrounding valleys will have an impact on the viability of all native species.” In our view, absent a systematic view of the overall area and its multiple ecosystems, there is no way to develop anything close to a full appreciation of the “direct and indirect human impacts...” mentioned in the Principle. By extension, we also believe that, by definition, an “Environmental Issue Task Force” cannot achieve this integrative perspective.

Similarly, Theme 1’s multiple additional references to “cumulative impacts” (e.g. policies 1.1.b (*Monitor cumulative human impacts*), 1.1.d (*Limit development in crucial habitat*), 1.1.e (*Require mitigation of impacts to crucial habitat*), 1.2.c (*Monitor and maintain water quality*), and 1.5.d (*Maintain dark night skies*)) all suggest the need for a body which takes a more global view of the region’s environment. Hence *Strategy 1.1: Establish an Environment Commission*, of which “Part of their charge will be to address the challenges of evaluating cumulative impacts of human actions as described in Policy 1.1.b.”

Again, while we very much appreciate the need to get the politics of this issue right, we also are concerned that, as proposed, the “Environmental Issue Task Force” cannot get bigger-picture ecosystems science right.

So what are the alternatives?

As we expressed in a January 27 letter to local elected officials, our ideal solution would be for the County and Town to form an Environment Commission. If that can't or won't occur, we would prefer to see a county-only Environment Commission rather than something along the lines of the "Environmental Issue Task Force."

That noted, we also appreciate the desire to have the County and Town join together in this effort. To that end, we offered the following idea as a compromise between a full-blown Environment Commission and the "Environmental Issue Task Force."

Our suggestion is to appoint an "Environmental Science Task Force" that would sunset after three years. Its membership would be along the lines proposed by the planning staffs to fill the Environment Commission, namely several scientists with specific expertises, a policy person, and one at-large position.

The "Environmental Science Task Force" would be given three specific tasks:

1. Identify all the scientific studies that have been done on Tetons-area ecosystems, and evaluate their importance and quality.
2. Based on the conclusions reached in task 1, identify significant, relevant, and substantive gaps in our ecosystem knowledge.
3. Based on the conclusions reached in task 2, prioritize future data needs and research goals so that policy makers will have the best available science when they consider future issues. This prioritization would be based on two criteria: the goals identified in the new comp plan, and discussions with elected officials, planners, scientists, and other specialists about likely town and county development scenarios over the next 5-10 years.

In our view, tasks 1 and 2 should take two years, at which time the "Environmental Science Task Force" can use the information identified to begin the prioritization process specified in task 3.

Our understanding is that the "Environmental Issue Task Force" proposal was an effort to address three concerns: cost, the potential of creating a new bureaucracy, and the potential for creating a political tool that might be improperly used by those with a particular axe to grind. How might the "Environmental Science Task Force" be judged against these concerns?

Regarding costs, there would clearly be costs associated with the "Environmental Science Task Force," specifically the need for a staff person to assist the task force members (e.g. to identify and evaluate the studies done on the region's ecosystems). However, no new research would be required, so the cost would be relatively low. Further, as we understand it, you have already struck an agreement with the Teton Conservation District to provide the funding for such an effort, so the actual cost to the County and Town governments would be minimal.

Regarding creating a new bureaucracy, we do not see a risk here, as the effort would sunset after three years. Further, were the effort considered a success, the "Environmental Science Task Force" could easily be converted into a full-blown Environment Commission.

Regarding being used as a political tool, this seems unlikely because both the task force's composition and focus would be science-driven. Additionally, as we foresee it, the "Environmental Science Task Force" would have neither regulatory nor recommending authority. Nor would it be tasked with opining on specific development applications. Instead, its mission would be to gather and evaluate information, and recommend studies at broader temporal and spatial scales.

Even if we're wrong about the potential for politicization, where will we be three years from now? At a

minimum, the “Environmental Science Task Force” will provide the entire community – policy makers and lay people alike – a better, fact-based understanding of the region’s environment. At best this will lead to more enlightened, fact-based discussions about environment-related questions and policies. At worst, we’ll be no worse off than we are now: people would use and mis-use the new, more-comprehensive understanding of our environment the same way they use and mis-use incomplete and inconclusive data today.

In closing, thank you for your efforts in trying to find the “sweet spot” between local politics and the community’s desire to inform environmental policy with the best possible science. We appreciate this is hard work, both mentally and emotionally, and salute you for it. Thank you too for consideration of our views, and please let us know if there is anything we can do to assist you and/or your colleagues.