

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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A few years ago, I initiated Sustaining Jackson Hole. The core of Sustaining Jackson Hole is over a dozen Working Groups, each of which focuses on an important aspect of the community. Combined, the work done by these groups allows the larger Sustaining Jackson Hole effort to address its four goals:

1. Develop a comprehensive, fact-based understanding of the greater Jackson Hole community;
2. Based on that understanding, identify the qualities about Jackson Hole which the community wants to sustain for future generations;
3. Define those qualities in a way which can be clearly measured (because if something can't be measured, it can't be evaluated); and
4. Identify and take steps to sustain those qualities.

Because sustaining environmental quality is the primary focus of the revised Comp Plan, two weeks ago, the joint Town and County planning commissions asked me to share the findings of Sustaining Jackson Hole's Environment Working Group. Today's column is adapted from that presentation. (A copy of the presentation can be downloaded from my website, [charture.org](http://www.charture.org). The specific URL is http://www.charture.org/presentations_details.php?year_sort=2009)

The presentation focused on three points, which I expand on below:

1. During the life of the new Comp Plan, no matter how many homes we build, demand will outstrip supply.
2. The current draft of the new plan is chock-a-block with ambiguous goals and objectives, which creates a confused and confusing document. This ambiguity needs to be eliminated. While doing so will be difficult, not doing so will create tremendous problems for future generations of officials and developers alike.
3. The primary focus of the revised plan is sustaining the local environment. To formally sanction that focus, the town and county governments should create an Environment Commission to advise them on issues relating to the region's ecological health.

Point 1. During the 1960s-1980s, tourism played a major role in changing Jackson Hole. Since around 1990, though, Jackson Hole's growth and change have been driven by a combination of six other factors: changes in technology, the economy, transportation, mores, values, and the quality of urban and suburban life. Going forward, these forces and changes will continue to affect our community, as they are not going to abate or reverse themselves. As a result, planning officials and the community at large should assume that growth and change pressures will remain as acute as they have been for the past 15-20 years.

Point 2. Each of the seven Themes in the current draft of the Comp Plan begins with a Statement of Ideal, a tool introduced locally by Sustaining Jackson Hole, and one never before used in any land use plan. Because Statements of Ideal are new, and because the concept is not defined in the plan's current draft, it is likely they are adding further confusion and controversy to an already confusing and controversial process.

This is too bad because, if done right, Statements of Ideal are extraordinarily powerful tools. A good Statement of Ideal is unambiguous, binary, and measurable, qualities which make it both inspirational and operational. If done well, the new Comp Plan's Statements of Ideal will not only encapsulate our community's vision of itself, but give us a tool for judging whether proposed future actions move us closer to, or further from, that vision.

That's the potential. Unfortunately, though, while planners deserve tremendous credit for making Statements of Ideal the cornerstone of each of the seven Themes, the Statements of Ideal in the current draft are not very good. The best of them need improvement; the worst are merely Vision Statements, minor

league Statements of Ideal with dreams of someday developing enough rigor to make it to the bigs.

As a result, when reviewing the new plan, officials and the community as a whole should ask whether the current draft's Statements of Ideal are in fact unambiguous, binary, and capable of being measured. If they end up sharing my conclusion that all seven fail this test, then each offender should be re-written, re-labeled as a Vision Statement, or simply discarded.

Why go through this effort? Because producing good Statements of Ideal will require us to precisely identify the qualities we want to pursue in each Theme, and unambiguously define them so they can be measured. While such an exercise will prove challenging, it simply must be done: The greater the clarity now, the more useful the document will be in the future.

Put another way, the Comp Plan's Statements of Ideal should be the encapsulation of how the community views itself and, by extension, how the plan reflects that vision. If they remain ambiguous platitudes, they'll do little more than enable us to continue our severely dysfunctional habit of staging to-the-death fights over each and every land use proposal. If, on the other hand, the Comp Plan's Statements of Ideal are clear and simple descriptions of what we want and value, future planning decisions can become much less complicated and controversial.

In contrast, if we duck the challenge and don't make the Plan much more precise, future officials will end up making decisions on an ad hoc basis, which in turn will erode the fundamental purpose of a comprehensive plan. That's what's happened during the past several years, and that's why we're revisiting the plan today. It's also why the Statements of Ideal are going to be the canaries in the coal mine for judging the quality of whatever plan emerges: the more unambiguous, binary, and measurable they are, the stronger the plan will be.

Point 3. In the view of the Sustaining Jackson Hole Environment Working Group, by creating Planning, Parks & Rec, Recycling, Pathways, Energy, Fair, Historic Preservation, and other commissions and boards, the Town and County governments have formally acknowledged that these areas are important to the community. So what does it tell us that there's no Environment Commission? If environmental sustainability is truly to be the focal point of the updated Comp Plan, a powerful way of demonstrating the sincerity of that focus would be to create an Environment Commission.

An Environment Commission would complement and formalize the ad hoc efforts conducted over the years by the many organizations and individuals who have attempted to address the community's many environmental concerns and opportunities. More importantly, an officially-sanctioned Environment Commission would provide local government and the community as a whole with a mechanism for taking an integrated, big-picture, and systematic look at the many environmental issues facing Jackson Hole.

An Environment Commission's greatest potential, however, lies in how it can bridge the many gaps that currently prevent planners, planning commissioners, elected officials, and other interested parties from receiving relevant, timely, and scientifically sound environmental data. By establishing an Environment Commission and charging it with helping integrate good ecological science with the planning process, the community will be able to make far more thoughtful and informed planning decisions than it has been able to in the past.

Updating the Comp Plan has been a long, difficult, and contentious process, and will continue to be so going forward. As a result, once the new plan is finally adopted, it will likely be a decade or more before we find the political will to revisit it.

That makes it all the more important to get the current plan right, which in turn means doing all we can now to give future planning officials a clear and unambiguous document, one with the tools needed for

making sound decisions with measurable outcomes. With its recommendation of an Environment Commission, the current draft contains one of these basic elements for long-term success. Its use of Statements of Ideal is another. However, as the planning commissions and other officials review the plan, they need to consider not only the big-picture issues which have dominated the debate so far, but also the plan's more subtle features, especially the Statements of Ideal. My strong feeling is that if the current effort produces Statements of Ideal which are truly unambiguous, binary, and measurable, it will be a clear indicator of a plan which can work well for many years to come.