

Proposed Teton County Water Strategies

Situated upstream of most of the Snake and Columbia River systems, Teton County must act as a good steward of our Western water assets. Working toward ensuring that the water is as clean leaving Teton County as when it entered, we have the opportunity to set a lofty standard for downstream counties. Our efforts should focus on improving connectivity (for both flowing and riparian habitat) and mitigating unnatural impacts at crossings. This program would best be advanced as a small part of a more general Teton County Natural Resources Action Plan (NRAP), which would function to inform County Commissioners in their decision-making.

Maintaining access to cold-water habitat as our climate changes, we must ensure that our waterways are connected so that trout can penetrate farther upstream. Development of a Teton Waterways Connectivity Plan (TWCP) should be a top priority. Like the Focal Species Habitat Mapping, the TWCP would identify critical aquatic and riparian corridors, quantifiably measure the effects of obstacles, and develop guidelines for resolving potential conflicts with property owners. The Wildlife Crossings Master Plan identifies six characteristics that impede connectivity. Using this analysis as our guide, we could quantify the impact of any given obstacle. If the obstacle under consideration does not fall under the desired threshold, we should put pressure on the landowner to remedy the issue. Collaboration with the Forest Service, BLM, and USDA will ensure that we also maintain strategically situated barriers to protect non-native species.

In order to further protect native habitat, the TWCP would inform Commissioners on strategies to reduce the impacts of our roadways on our waterways. There are a number of mitigation strategies that we can engineer into our waterways and bridges in order to reduce the velocity of water as it flows under our structures. Also, wherever feasible, we should ensure that our bridges span the flood plain of rivers. Study after study reveals that riparian habitat is the most valuable for supporting an ecosystem. Designing bridges that span not only the water but also the riparian habitat will create connectivity for land-based wildlife as well. Wherever possible, we should integrate wildlife crossings with our river crossings.

Most importantly, the County Commissioners should convene a wide-ranging group of land management officials and Conservation-minded stakeholders to submit a Natural Resources Action Plan. A comprehensive analysis of all Conservation issues- from the recycling to wildlife crossings, from bear-proof trash can requirements to plastic bag bans, from managing our forests to ensuring clean water- the NRAP would inform the decisions of our County Commissioners alongside the Comp Plan. We have exceeded certain development trigger points which require review of the Comp Plan. The NRAP could act as a triggered response for the Comp Plan's shortcomings. Further, I support language in the new NRPLCRs which focuses on discouraging development too close to valuable riparian and water habitat.

Unfortunately, there is only so much impact that we 20,000 residents can have on the global ecosystem. This fact should neither dishearten us, nor act as an excuse for us not to reduce our negative impacts whenever possible. On my first day as Commissioner, I will be working with START officials to create a more effective system of moving folks throughout our valley and beyond. If you would like further details on my exact strategy for giving the residents, commuters, and visitors better transit options, please visit my facebook page or website (info at the end).

The Comprehensive Plan charges us with acting as an example to communities like ours. I believe that the role of government (at all levels) in the 21st century is to create options for people to avoid being "part of the problem," whether that means creating effective transit service so that we have the option to move beyond our single-occupancy vehicle dependence or finding ways to keep our plastic out of landfills. I am committed to finding reasonable solutions for protecting our valuable natural resources.

Thanks,

Wes Gardner