

January 4, 2021  
Jackson Town Council  
Teton County Board of County Commissioners

**RE: The need for Ecosystem Stewardship staff and a new Department**

Dear Chair Macker, Mayor Morton-Levinson, Commissioners, and Councilors,

Our community has invested significant time and resources into two Comprehensive Plan priorities – housing & transportation – and we have measurable goals, action plans, and staff. We do not have the equivalent for our priority of Ecosystem Stewardship. While many Town and County programs and services directly or indirectly benefit our ecosystem stewardship goals (e.g., investments in pathways and transit, stormwater infrastructure, smart land-use planning), they are not enough. The myriad threats to our wildlife, water quality, and wild lands will continue to intensify as our community grows. **Please add a dedicated ecosystem stewardship staff position to your FY 2021-2022 budget.**

The town and county need a new staff person to address water quality, wildlife and habitat, climate change mitigation, land conservation initiatives, and state and federal agency proposals. We need professional staff, such as a senior ecologist or natural resource director, to prevent further loss and degradation of our natural resources and address the critical gaps in existing government programs, such as the Teton County Scenic Preserve Trust. Hiring a dedicated ecological staff person could save money by preventing expensive after-the-fact fixes like water treatment in Hoback. They would also coordinate with individual residents, non-profit groups, agency personnel, and other departments to provide an ecological perspective, analytical tools, and responsible alternatives for relevant policies, plans, and projects. A full-time conservation professional would have the authority to present recommendations to you and the public for better decision-making.

In order to honor our conservation legacy and support a vibrant human community in balance with the natural world, **the conservation staff person should be hired into a newly formed department, dedicated to natural resources and ecosystem stewardship.** A new department would focus on the ecosystem as its priority, bringing balance with other departments' priorities. Please create this department, even if it is a department of only one professional staff initially. The new department should focus on four areas of protection: land, water, wildlife, and climate, which we outline below.

**We believe that investing in ecosystem stewardship staff will save time, money, and resources in the future by providing efficiency, oversight, and planning.** We also recognize your tight budgets, and our organizations will help explore other public or philanthropic funding options for a dedicated staff person and an ecological stewardship department. We will work hard to engage our constituents and the whole community to support this position.

We believe dedicated ecosystem stewardship staff in an independent and empowered department is necessary to "preserve and protect the area's ecosystem" and to incorporate natural resource considerations as a standard practice in all local government activities.

## **Examples of potential responsibilities of a new stewardship-focused department:**

**Water:** Our drinking water supply is compromised; our public water systems lack the most basic protections. Water quality issues are now at the forefront of public concern. Timely implementation of the water quality strategies included in the Comp Plan updates will require significant new resources and dedicated staff time to complete. Roles could include:

- Lead the development of a water quality enhancement plan
- Oversee the implementation of the Comprehensive County-Wide Wastewater Management Plan, update local regulations
- Coordinate with Public Health on monitoring contaminants in public water systems
- Develop stormwater management best practices
- Identify tools to protect our sole source aquifer, including the creation of an Aquifer Protection Overlay, Source Water Assessments and Protection Plans, etc.
- Develop a river and levee management plan
- Engage with state and federal agency's on planning and rulemaking processes
- Engage in water resource management (e.g., Wild and Scenic Rivers)

**Land:** Conservation of both private and public lands are essential for ecosystem functionality. Your departments of planning and building services, public works, parks and recreation, and health make daily decisions with far reaching environmental repercussions; these lack input from a dedicated ecological staff person. We need ecosystem stewardship staff to guide internal processes within Town and County, and to partner with federal/state agencies and represent the vision of our community. Responsibilities could include:

### Private Land Plans, Projects, and Policies:

- Ecosystem Monitoring: updating Natural Resource LDR's, exploring restoration efforts
- Define ecosystem stewardship goals and metrics, as called for in the Comp Plan
- Develop an Ecosystem Action Plan and implement strategies outlined in the Comp Plan (e.g., a cumulative impact study)
- Development Proposals: Provide structure/criteria/guidelines for formal review of new development, transportation, and land management projects
- Develop improved tools and incentives for open space preservation in the county

### Public Lands Plans, Projects, and Policies:

- Review new plans, actions, and policies of state and federal agencies for their alignment with community goals (e.g. proposed Targhee expansion, Elk Feedgrounds)
- Manage existing easements in the Teton County Scenic Preserve Trust (TCSPT), and identify and acquire new strategic easements
- Shepherd high-value land transfers (BLM parcels, State Trust Lands)

**Wildlife:** With reduced water quality and quantity, lost and degraded habitat, and severed corridors, wildlife populations of all kinds and sizes are threatened directly and indirectly. We lack coherent policies and programs to reduce these individual and cumulative impacts. A professional natural resource manager could:

- Implement the Wildlife Crossings Master Plan

- Develop tools and partnerships with landowners to mitigate human-wildlife and wildlife-livestock conflicts, like Chronic Wasting Disease
- Measure/monitor landscape permeability for wildlife, critical habitat, and connectivity
- Review and promote “living with nature” programs and regulations (bear-proof trash cans, wildlife friendly fencing, fire prevention in wildland urban interface)

**Climate Action / Sustainability:** Climate change is a cross-cutting threat to our wildlife and ecosystem, wild lands and vegetation, and community character. We have a responsibility to reduce our impact on the global climate crisis felt even here in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Jackson Hole has an outsized impact on the national and international policy debate on climate, and while we can’t prevent climate change alone, we can be part of the solution rather than the problem. We appreciate the addition of a new goal for climate action and a Climate / Sustainability Action Plan in the Comp Plan Update, and we believe this project would fit well in the new ecosystem stewardship department.

It is our community’s responsibility, and a top priority, to preserve our natural resources. This requires staffing and funding beyond what is currently allocated. **Please vote to fund this position and department in the FY 2021-2022 budget.**

Sincerely,

The following members of the Systems of Conservation collaborative:

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