

Land Use Planning as an Important Conservation Strategy

by PCEC staff

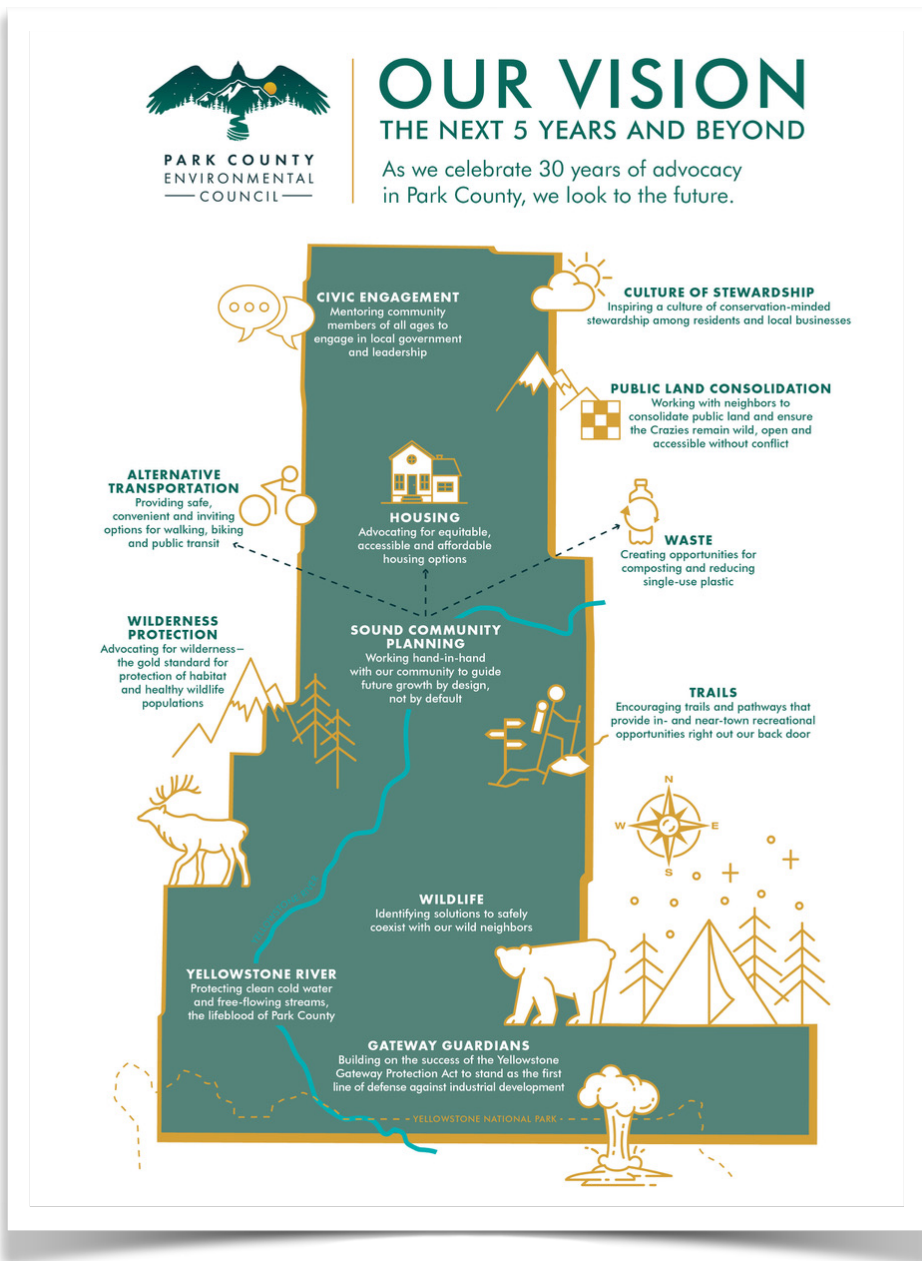
Two years ago, the Park County Environmental Council (PCEC) celebrated the passage of the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act as it removed the threat of two industrial-scale gold mines from more than 30,000 acres of the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

This victory was the culmination of years of effort by PCEC and our partners. Over those years, we helped organize hundreds of local businesses to come together and form the Yellowstone Gateway Business Coalition, recognizing that this place — this community of Park County, Montana, at the northern edge of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem — wasn't worth risking for a couple of gold mines.

Since the bill became law, PCEC's staff and members have hardly had a moment's rest as we played whack-a-mole with new developments that threatened the idea of gateway protection: A tire dump. Oil and gas leases. A gravel pit.

Protecting this special place requires constant vigilance. There is no shortage of bad ideas that could carve up, cut down, poison and spoil this one-of-a-kind ecosystem, which provides habitat for all the major species of mammals that were present in the Lower 48 prior to the arrival of Europeans. In the words of PCEC member Colin Davis, PCEC "walks the fence at night" to protect the Yellowstone Gateway.

But, increasingly, the threats facing Park County aren't just coming from industrial sources. They are also coming from population growth and increased visitation. Neighboring Gallatin County is the fastest-growing metropolitan community in the United States. Four million people visit Yellowstone National Park every year. The impact of all these visitors and newcomers is drastically



changing the makeup of nearby communities.

The effects of growth and change threaten the very same tourism-based economy that our locals want to protect from pollution related to industrial-scale gold mines. Growth can mean a lot of things, including habitat fragmentation; water quantity and water quality issues; and increasing inequity.

For example, in the town of Gardiner, Yellowstone's only year-round entrance, investors have gobbled up the existing housing stock and turned it into vacation rentals, pricing locals out of the market. School enrollment has dropped, while businesses (including Yellowstone National Park itself) now have trouble

attracting qualified employees because they can't find a place to live.

With this in mind, in recent years, Park County Environmental Council has doubled down on our program work in land-use planning, organizing community leaders and business owners who share an underlying belief that the local community, not developers, should determine how Gardiner, Livingston and Park County ought to grow.

PCEC works with partners to encourage elected officials to initiate updates to community growth plans, even raising private funds when government officials with strapped budgets are reluctant to pay for this much needed update. Once finalized,

Livingston's growth plan should reflect the community's vision and serve as a guiding document for future regulation and zoning. To help shape the process, PCEC has informed and organized hundreds of community members by hosting community conversations, bringing in national experts to present smart growth principles and explain complex planning concepts.

It's working. We are seeing conversations shift as new members of the Livingston and Park County planning boards consider public comment and ask questions like, how does this plan protect the urban wildlife corridor along the Yellowstone River, prevent sprawl into our open space, and encourage infill development in our downtown areas? After Park County finalized its 2017 growth plan, PCEC members thanked the County Commission and asked them to focus on Goal 16: implementing proactive land-use tools. The commission agreed. Now newly engaged community members have joined city and county boards to implement these plans.

PCEC sits down at the table with ranchers, outfitters, landowners, and recreationists to discuss how to manage our community's most precious resource, the Yellowstone River, today and for years to come. As a partner in the Upper Yellowstone Watershed Group, PCEC helped complete the first phase of a recreational study on the Yellowstone River that sought to identify who is using the river, when are they using it, and what are they using it for. As a community, we are working together to build an understanding of how the increased demand from all user groups impacts the river.

National Park gateway communities are unique places, with immense character and tremendous natural resources. People love these places, and that love has been demonstrated in the support for PCEC's work. For instance, thousands of residents have completed surveys, while scores of others have submitted comments, attended meetings and used their voices for this place. Even the consultant preparing Livingston's growth policy update has commented



Yellowstone River flows north through the Paradise Valley in Park County.

Photo: Eric Ian

that they rarely see the level of engagement that our local citizenry has demonstrated even in communities far larger than ours.

It is clear to us at PCEC that the front lines of conservation are at planning board meetings and zoning commission discussions. Protecting open space and wildlands from the ever-expanding human footprint is our new conservation focus.

During the pandemic, housing prices skyrocketed, fueled by an exodus from urban areas into rural landscapes. People from across the nation now seek refuge in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. As a community, we need to balance the need for more affordable housing while home prices soar, creating a desire and demand for sprawl and unchecked development. Our work centers on making our urban centers better and more affordable places for people to live, incentivizing people to live within smaller footprints.

Clearly, conservationists not only bear the responsibility to protect intact ecosystems, we also must protect the people and communities that rely on a healthy environment. We need to coexist with wildlife, preserve intact habitat, and create resiliency in the face of climate

change, balancing our need for scarce resources with those of the area's flora and fauna. This is the work of PCEC, now and into the future.



Sean Hawksford took to the corner of Main Street and Willson Avenue in Bozeman, MT to make a plea for someone to sell him a home.

Photo: Sean Hawksford