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Land conservation and the 2010 town comp plan

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The Sopris Sun

Density or sprawl? Before a town can begin to talk about creating a comprehensive plan, its leaders and citizens must tackle some basic questions. That includes how much to grow and where to grow.

Although density is always a debated topic in the town's land use discussions, Carbondale already has defined in its 2000 Comprehensive Plan a compact area in which to grow. As a result, the town's growth will be centered within its 1,275-acre town limits.

"One of the great values of the existing [comp] plan is that it identifies a fairly compact area in which Carbondale can grow. You won't see any kind of a sprawling suburban growth pattern. If somebody tries to come in and buy the surrounding land to develop it, the community has ample support to say, 'No,'" said Town Manager Tom Baker.

That means Carbondale has been able to avoid the sprawl that many other areas have suffered. Depending on how you feel when you drive east on Interstate 70 and see Denver and its expansive suburbs, that may be a good thing. There are no more dots to connect between the towns on the Front Range.

"One of the biggest challenges that Carbondale and all communities face is the temptation to look to undeveloped areas for expansion because it is easier and less expensive than redeveloping areas already in use. However, each acre that is lost to buildings is an acre of lost wildlife habitat or a lost opportunity," said Aspen Valley Land Trust Executive Director Martha Cochran.

Carbondale's geography may prevent some of that sprawl from taking place. However, another important element that factors into the picture is what type of land surrounds the town.

An aerial snapshot of Carbondale shows that the town is surrounded by a mix of privately held lots, large areas of public land, and ranch and agricultural property. Among that ranch land are some large parcels held in conservation easements, voluntary legal agreements that preserve private property for scenic open space, agriculture, wildlife and recreation. The town's northern boundary is defined by Highway 82, the Roaring Fork River, the Red Hill recreation area, which is owned by the Bureau of Land Management, and relatively large private lots. To the west sits Colorado Rocky Mountain School, private homes and the large Crystal River Ranch that is under a conservation easement. To the south and southwest lie the BLM land of the Thompson Creek area, some private holdings and the Cold Mountain Ranch along Highway 133, which has been placed under a conservation easement. The BLM land of The Crown defines Carbondale's southeastern and eastern borders, along with agricultural property under conservation easements (Flying Dog, Tybar and John Nieslanik ranches), in addition to private land such as the Considine family ranch and the odd Te Ke Ki subdivision, which contains more than 300 small lots but is land-locked by the Considine property.

At a time when Americans are becoming increasingly aware of their need to be more self-sufficient, open agricultural land is critical to a community's long-term viability, Cochran says.

"Without undeveloped land, we no longer have the opportunity to take care of our food, fuel and other needs," she stated. "Even the wealthiest nation in the world cannot buy clean air, abundant water or healthy food; it has to create and protect those most valuable of resources community by community."

Open lands can provide space for solar plants, wind farms, biofuel production, community gardens and grazing land, argued Cochran, whose organization is the oldest land trust in Colorado and has helped conserve more than 30,000 acres in the Roaring Fork and upper Colorado river watersheds.

A downside to a town with a tight boundary, however, can be a higher cost for housing, a dilemma from which Carbondale already suffers. Towns like Aspen, which is also partly constrained by its geography, and Boulder, which is bounded by public open space, struggle with the same problem.

"Some people say the high price of housing has to do with the strict regulations of where they will allow growth. Boulder has encircled their town with green space, which is a very positive thing for the community but it does have consequences. Once you reach capacity you have to start talking about redevelopment," Cochran said.

That is also why Cochran, who served six years on the Carbondale Planning & Zoning Commission, served on the Glenwood Springs City Council and holds a master's degree in public policy, says individual citizens should get involved in comprehensive planning. At the citizen level, it's about how a person wants to live his or her life.

"For everyone it's about how you want to live your life. What do you want your day to be like? How do you want your kids to get to school? How do you want to go from home to work? These are the kinds of things you can actually plan for."

Next steps:

The Carbondale Planning & Zoning Commission has begun drafting a new town comprehensive plan and will be developing a process to solicit public involvement. The P&Z meets at 7 p.m. on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month at town hall. Meetings are open to the public.

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