

Valley Advocates for Responsible Development

Past, Present and Future

VARD began four years ago in “reaction to” a proposed development that threatened to pollute the surrounding groundwater. None of us who took a stand against that development were very familiar at the time with the Planning and Zoning process, the role of the County Commissioners, or the various state agencies with jurisdiction in Teton County like the Department of Environmental Quality or the Army Corps of Engineers.

Our initial reaction to the county’s way of dealing with that development was all too “human.” We assumed the worst. We assumed our local officials did not care about groundwater and favored developers over the health and safety of the rest of us. Our opposition was colored by that assumption. After four years of educating ourselves and working with the Teton County Planning and Zoning Commission, county commissioners and the cities of Driggs and Victor, our views have changed. The views held by many of our local officials about VARD have also changed. We now know that our local officials work hard for little pay with the best interest of our valley at heart, and many of our local officials appreciate VARD’s efforts on behalf of the community.

In retrospect, I believe VARD appeared on the scene at a critical turning point in Teton Valley’s history. VARD was formed just as Teton Valley’s rapid growth was transforming our community’s population from a small, static, homogenous population to a much larger, diverse one. Such changes demand that local government play a different role than it has in the past.

Before this turning point, when someone approached our commissioners or city council with a problem to be solved, it was a legitimate role of the local government to try to help that individual. There just weren’t that many people in the valley and the government is, after all, for the people. The commendable desire to help each person, I am sure, resulted in much good done in the past and is still the motivating force behind many of the decisions made today.

Now, in our rapidly growing community, the likely person asking for “help” at a commissioner meeting or P&Z meeting is someone seeking the approval of an application or a permit to develop their land, to start or expand a business or to rezone their property for some new use. If the first impulse of our officials remains to fulfill the request of the person in front of them, many other people may be disadvantaged. Over time the positive desire to help has remained the same; the result of that desire in our changed community, though, could be vastly different.

Local government’s role, as our community continues to diversify, has to change from one that is focused on being of service to the individual, to one that balances the competing needs of the many for the good of all. By doing so, each individual is then fairly and equally served. Local government must make sure that the minimum regulations necessary to protect the rights of all citizens are in place. Furthermore, local government must ensure that all regulations and procedures are consistently upheld. Initially, VARD mistook the commendable desire to fulfill a citizen’s request with a disregard for the welfare of others. Now we know we were all just experiencing the inevitable growing pains and misunderstandings inherent in growth. There is a larger picture for us all to see.

VARD has come full circle since our early days. We now recognize the difficulties and challenges of running our county and cities. Using what we have learned, we are striving to become more of a resource for our officials. We will use our time to research and find workable solutions to the many problems facing local government.

For example, in order for our valley to grow responsibly, our

local governments must have more funds to provide the essential services necessary for a growing population. Last fall, VARD commissioned and paid for a Cost of Services Study to help the county better prepare financially for the future. The study looked at the last four years of revenue and costs and projected the trend through 2005. VARD has continued this year to research and provide ways for the county to address projected revenue shortfalls. The focus of our research is to identify new revenue sources that do not further “tax” the citizens of the county. To grow responsibly, we must make sure our population remains diverse economically. Growth should not make our community too expensive for our existing population or for our children who wish to remain here.

Now that the county has adopted a new Comprehensive Plan, all of our ordinances will have to be examined and brought into line with the new plan. VARD is researching ordinances in communities across the West that have effectively addressed issues similar to the ones outlined in our Comprehensive Plan. We will make this research available to the county as it goes through the process of re-writing many of its ordinances.

Of course we will continue to attend all government meetings. If we disagree with a proposal, we will continue to offer other views and options based on sound research into what has worked well in other communities like ours. We will continue to work with our officials to ensure that the regulations that make government fair and consistent for all are understood and followed. All our efforts will be offered in the spirit of cooperation with the one intention of making our community a better place for everyone.

If we are successful, our efforts will help bring about a community that will continue to grow, keeping our cities and county prosperous. We will learn from the past in order to project accurately into the future so we can plan our growth to enhance the natural characteristics of our valley—the things that make people want to visit and live here. If we want to remain prosperous, we must understand that our unique community character is what drives our prosperity. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming one more Western community that has lost its unique character.

VARD envisions vital and prosperous downtown areas in our cities surrounded by appropriate businesses to support our community. We see a county, though becoming more populated, that still retains its rural character, wildlife, clean waterways and expansiveness. In VARD’s vision of the valley’s future, our local governments will have the additional revenue needed to systematically upgrade our roads and offer other essential services like jails, a quality hospital and trash-disposal system. We imagine a citizenry that is informed and educated about the processes of our local government, and actively participates in local decision-making with respect for the differing views of our diverse community.

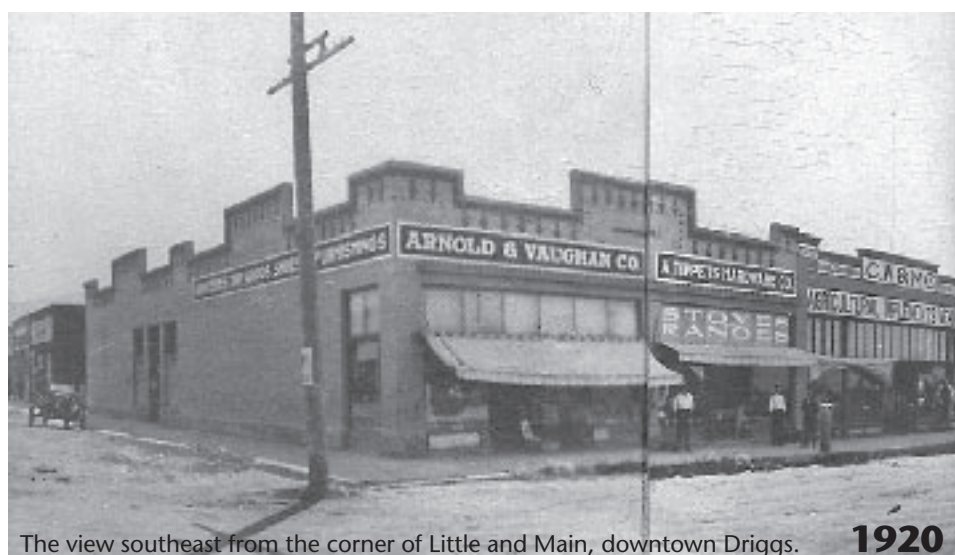
VARD needs your support and input to work toward these goals. Please read on. We will outline current issues of importance to all of us and provide VARD’s perspective. We welcome feedback and comment and will strive to provide alternative views on these issues in future newsletters. It is our hope that we will be able to mail regular newsletters to all the residents of Teton Valley. We want you to hear directly from us about what we are doing and the reasons for our actions. Finally, we would like to hear your concerns and thoughts about our growing valley.

— Jeff Carter, VARD Volunteer Executive Director

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The view southeast from the corner of Little and Main, downtown Driggs. 1920



2005

A Conversation with Ed McMahon

Understanding community operation and planning can be a challenging task. Just looking at the Idaho statutes governing our own community can be dizzying. However, having knowledge of what makes communities work well is critical and VARD believes that every resident should be able to not only comprehend but actively advocate for his or her community. In an effort to better understand issues such as managing growth, commercial zoning and open space, VARD asked for help from a friend and partner, Ed McMahon. Ed has given many presentations on growth and development in eastern Idaho, including Driggs. Ed's last visit to the valley was last summer as a keynote for the Your Town design workshop. Ed is an authority on the issues that come with rapid growth in rural communities. Ed is also very familiar with Teton County and the problems our community is facing. He co-authored the book *Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities*. Ed is a Senior Resident Fellow at the Urban Land Institute, an organization dedicated to providing responsible leadership in the use of land to enhance the total environment. Ed also has served as the Vice President for Land Use Program at The Conservation Fund.

We asked Ed for his thoughts and commentary on a series of issues relating to growth and development in Teton County. We have added follow-up commentary from VARD.

What is community character and why is it something that Teton Valley should strive to maintain?

Answer: Community character is what makes Teton County, Idaho different from every place else in America. A community's image and character is fundamentally important to its economic well being. Everyday in America, people make decisions about where to live, where to invest, where to vacation and where to retire based on what our communities look like. The more Teton County comes to look like every place else in America, the less reason there is to visit or invest.

VARD: We believe that part of maintaining Teton County's uniqueness is making sure that as the county develops, it does not lose sight of the resources driving our growth. These resources are our community character and natural amenities such as our fish-filled streams and rivers, our forests filled with all types of wildlife, and our clean air and water. The more we trade our resources for development and growth the less attractive a community we become.

There are those who say development is the way for our county to grow in prosperity, and if we do not approve all development plans we are hurting our community. Is that true?

Answer: All development is not created equal. When it comes to development, communities that set high standards compete to the top. Those that accept anything will compete to the bottom.

VARD: We understand that the key to meeting the demands of our growing community is through smart developing. While we agree that well thought out and environmentally sensitive developments are good for the county, we feel strongly that many of the currently proposed developments will not benefit our county. Many developments are health risks to our water sources. Again, in order to protect our most important resources we should be discriminating with regard to the developments, both residential and commercial, that enter our community.

Many people will argue that land-use planning restricts people's freedom to do with their property what they wish. People have also argued that land-use planning will hurt property values. Is land-use planning bad for Teton County?

Answer: There are only two kinds of change in America: planned change and unplanned change. Unplanned change will destroy everything people love about Teton County. Sensible land-use regulations always increase property values. Open space increases property values. A good development will always make more money than a poorly planned development.

VARD: VARD could not agree more with Ed on the issue of land-use

planning. When zoning is not well thought out, no one benefits. Land-owners need guarantees that their investment will be protected. Land values are protected throughout the country through the use of local land-use planning. Private property rights are intricately tied to the law – if we ignore one over the other, no one benefits. We are already seeing examples of industrial operations being constructed next to residential areas and the resulting deterioration of home values surrounding these industrial areas. Conversely, the zoning of dense residential land next to working agricultural land makes it difficult for farmers to farm.

Another argument we have heard in Teton County is that we should allow commercial zoning throughout the county. Should commercial zoning and business be allowed anywhere in the county?

Answer: The two distinguishing characteristics of commercial strip development are traffic congestion and ugliness. This is not a recipe for success. People prefer to shop in town centers and similar places that attract their affection.

VARD: Through our independent research we have found that communities that concentrate commercial zoning in clusters, particularly clusters around existing commercial areas like downtowns, have greater financial success. Unplanned commercial zoning proliferating throughout the county increases the need for a car-dependent community and furthers air- and water-quality deterioration. Furthermore, commercial sprawl across the county is a financial burden for the government because it increases the expenses of providing resources like fire, police and emergency protection to businesses, not to mention the cost of road construction and maintenance.

How can Teton County prevent the mistakes of many other Western communities?

Answer: The first principle of better development is figuring out where you don't develop. Having a long-range conservation plan gives everyone (developers, local government, conservation organizations) what they want: predictably and certainty.

VARD: There is a balance between preserving personal freedom and protecting the communal resources we all need to live. VARD believes that people should be able to develop their investments, but we realize that those freedoms should not harm the general community. Restricting massive development in wetlands protects our precious river and its tributaries, which are a vital part of our economy and critical to public health. Smart land-use planning allows people to invest in Teton County with confidence that their investments are protected.



Photo by Cindy Hanger

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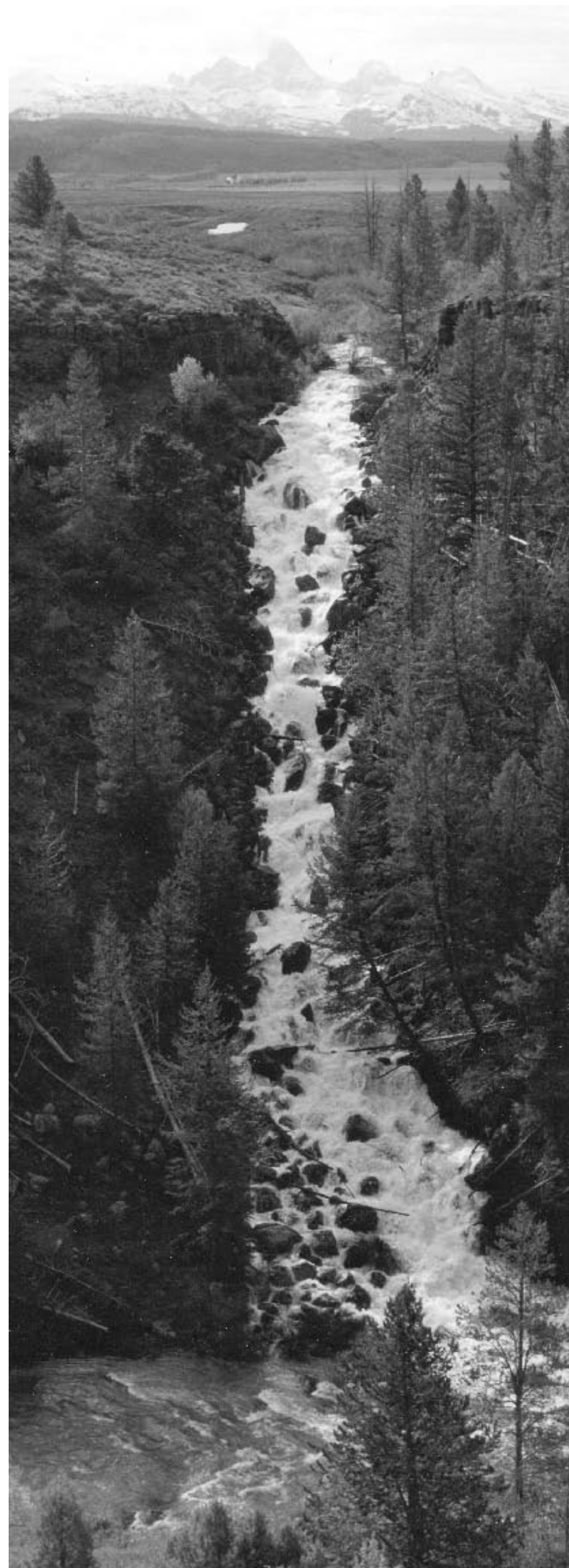


Photo by Greg Yaskot

Upcoming VARD Projects and Initiatives

Teton County Comprehensive Plan

Teton County officials have recently completed the new Comprehensive Plan (*A Guide For Development 2004-2010*). A Comprehensive Plan is a guide for county commissioners to help them plan for the future growth of Teton Valley. Now, work needs to be completed to bring the county's guidelines and regulations into compliance with the new plan. This is a substantial task for the county and VARD is looking forward to assisting local officials in this important task.

Safeguarding the Valley's Surface Water

We all recognize the importance of our creeks and river to the valley both economically as well as for our public health. Development in wetland areas can cause serious harm to our drinking water and these fragile ecosystems. The economic impact of wetland destruction would be serious and the cost of clean up and repair to wetlands once they have been damaged is often significant. It is in everyone's best interest, from the farmer to the recreational fisherman, to prevent wetland and water-quality destruction. VARD is working on crafting ordinances that would help protect these areas of critical concern in the valley.

Conservation of Important Wildlife Habitats

Along with wetlands, protecting riparian areas as well as other critical wildlife habitat areas is important for the future environmental health of Teton Valley. The riparian areas sprinkled throughout the valley are essential for the survival of numerous species of mammals, fish, and birds. These critical wildlife habitat areas, including forest edges and meadows, play a vital role in maintaining healthy wildlife populations that are unique to Teton Valley. VARD is researching how, through our county ordinances, we can help to protect these important assets of Teton Valley.

Helping to Preserve Teton Valley's Heritage

Currently, a major issue in the valley is the passing-on of land within families. We want to ensure that families can easily and inexpensively pass land on to their children. VARD is looking to other communities that already have such provisions in their ordinances in order to find one that will fit the needs of Teton Valley.

Maintaining Teton Valley's Unique Community Character

Through research of other communities in Idaho and across the West, VARD is working to find ideas and examples on how to keep Teton Valley a wonderful place to live and work. Commercial zoning in the county has been a major issue in recent months. It is VARD's hope that through the study of other communities in the West, a positive outcome can be reached regarding this issue. Our goal is to uphold the uniqueness of Teton Valley, which will in turn promote increased financial well-being for the county. We believe we can achieve both through smart planning and development.

Safeguarding the Valley's Groundwater

VARD is researching different methods of protecting our precious groundwater, one of Teton Valley's most valuable and delicate resources and critical to our public health. The rapid growth that Teton County is currently experiencing has caused a host of water-quality issues. Without testing and investigation, the future of Teton County water is uncertain. Rapid growth and development does not have to negatively affect our water. VARD is working hard to find practical and cost-effective solutions for developers and local officials to help maintain Teton Valley's clean and healthy water supply.

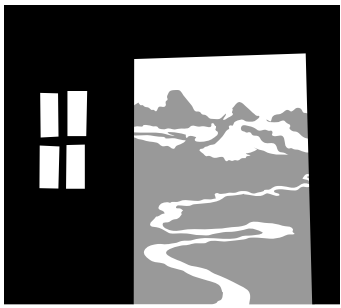
Collaboration with our Local Governments

VARD has been very involved with Teton County and the city of Driggs as a resource for responsible development. We have been, and will continue to be, a resource to these governing bodies. We want to broaden our outlook and extend our resources and services to the cities of Victor and Teton. Responsible development in Teton Valley cannot be segregated – what benefits the county also benefits its municipalities and vice versa. We want to expand our reach and help all our local officials as they grapple with issues related to growth and development.

Promoting Financial Health in our Local Governments

Money, unfortunately, plays a large role in the health of Teton County. VARD realizes how difficult a task the county and cities have in raising revenue to cover the cost of running our community. Therefore, VARD is actively researching ways to generate more revenue streams – including federal, state and private grants – for the county and its municipalities.

If any of these future projects interest you and you would like to help VARD, feel to contact us at (208) 354 1707 or e-mail us at info@tetonvalleyadvocates.org



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photo by Greg Yaskot

Dear Teton Valley residents:

I hope you take the opportunity to read Valley Advocates for Responsible Development's (VARD) second valley-wide publication. If you recall, our first publication was a comparison of the different drafts of the new comprehensive plan. I hope this mailing will provide you with a more in-depth look at VARD and what we are trying to achieve.

As an organization, we are sharpening our focus so VARD can better proceed on a clear and effective course. We started the process of creating a Strategic Plan in early March. Although our meetings are only the beginning of a journey, I want to share with you the main goals we are setting for VARD's future.

Two of our main goals are:

- To be recognized as a positive voice for the Teton Valley community. We believe VARD's message for responsible development resonates with all constituencies. When the rubber hits the road responsible development means economic prosperity, jobs, clean air and water, low taxes, community character, fair and consistent government and properly funded services such as hospitals, schools, law enforcement and fire protection. We see our role as an information resource and collaborative partner for both local government and Teton County residents. We see this position as an important niche to fill in the community. We look forward to increasing and broadening our membership and community involvement. By doing so, we hope to energize our new and existing members and grow our community of volunteers.
- In order to fill this niche and provide this important resource VARD needs to be adequately funded. We have a very talented and dedicated staff that operates under very limited resources. Improved funding equates to more resources for the community on how to develop responsibly. Our goal is for VARD to have consistent funding from a variety of sources including membership and grants. In conjunction with our strategic planning we are designing a more comprehensive development plan that will be our roadmap to ensure that VARD's work will be properly funded well into the future.

As the community of Teton Valley works through the various challenges of rapid growth, I hope we can continue to work together to ensure that our valley remains the special place people have come to cherish.

Sincerely,
 Georgie Stanley
 VARD Board President
 Victor, Idaho

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