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From the Director's Desk: Wildlife and Us

As if nature were making a point about the Booth Heights housing proposal in Vail and other projects facing fierce public opposition based on wildlife impacts, December 1st a [Bighorn ram was hit by a car](#) and killed on the frontage road near the proposed development. As one [wildlife biologist](#) opined in the Vail Daily, the wildlife/development conflict isn't specific to this project so much as it is cumulative.

How do you address cumulative impacts? With data and a plan. Biologists in recent aerial surveys have documented the [elk population around Vail in Unit 45 reducing from 1,000 to just 53 elk](#). Take that in for a moment. I did last April as the snows lingered late keeping the elk herds in Eagle in town later than usual on a magical evening while walking a near my home, I counted well over 1,000 head of elk near and across the valley, heard coyotes. Around every corner, I smelled the pungency of the herd. In the lingering golden light, I felt deeply thankful to share this habitat.



It's December 15th now as I wake at our home in Eagle Ranch. After a day of snowstorms creaking our rafters, closing Vail Pass, torturing travel, the temperatures dropped. This morning I expect to wake to untrampled snow. Instead, opening my front door, from my flower beds to the horizon just about every inch of snow is pockmarked with hoof prints. Trails of elk droppings crisscross the driveway. Patches of lawn and tall grassy zones all around the house are rooted out, with green grass tossed across the disturbed snow. The elk herd grazed through in the night right through our yard. We did not hear them. Some nights, their movements make me restless which I may only understand in the morning. Other nights, we hear them calling to each other and may peer out to watch them move through our yard in the moonlight like shadows.



12/16/19 grazing near where the ram was killed

In the Town of Eagle and specifically in Eagle Ranch, this proximity to wildlife is by design. Eagle is one of the few towns I know in the high country which has planned comprehensively to be wildlife-friendly. This was not without debate. Some said that any development would decimate the animal population. Others pointed to the hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands surrounding town. When we first arrived, most of the surrounding public lands were much less traveled. Separated

from the public by vast private ranches with minimal access near town, the few of us who explored on bike, motorbike or foot went miles out of our way to circle back near town. The sense of being a visiting human in these places was clear. Now with so many trails, that sense has flipped on the edges of town.

Evenings before Eagle Ranch developed, we watched the elk herd in the thousands descend into West Eagle Ranch from our townhome in the Terrace. Back then, as they do now, deer lounge around old town for most of the year. In the spring, reports of the presence of mountain lion or bear within town limits are common. These days, as recreation promoters (which seem to be most of us) push harder to walk, bike, drive, motor bike and snowmobile for our enjoyment into these surrounding lands, and certain developments may attract NIMBYs using the wildlife argument, mostly the recreationists or developers "win" since they are less shy about showing up to public meetings than animals.

I like to think that planning ahead for wildlife in Eagle when it only had 2,000 residents will relate to different outcomes as it pushes 10,000 residents in upcoming years. Approved in 1999 with over 1000 acres of open space adjacent to and winding along Brush Creek, and corridors that utilize the golf course fairways, Eagle Ranch has strategic undeveloped plots to create wildlife corridors. As the 1996 Eagle Area Plan envisioned, the less dense portions of the 1,200-unit project may look like typical sprawl to some, though to the observant, these represent a chain of un-development which has been consciously placed. Fenced yard areas are limited, most yards must have unmanicured tall grass areas.

When we first moved in to our home during the winter of 2001, many evenings we stopped our car blocks from home as well over 2000 head of elk crossed our headlights for many long minutes. Friends visiting marveled that we lived on a set of Wild Kingdom. It was breathtaking, the energy of so many beasts, running, their vapors trailing in the night air. This still happens, if less frequently or dramatically. These days, 10 to 30 elk meandering in front of waiting vehicles are common on winter nights in Eagle Ranch.



Large elk herd

Many communities, including Vail, have volunteers who enforce trail closures for wildlife. In Eagle, December 15th also marks the first day of winter closure of all trailheads each year by the wildlife standards adopted in the Eagle Ranch PUD guide, adopted back when I was a new Trustee at the town. Department of Wildlife officials requested this so that elk could rest undisturbed and not lose precious calories getting up to move away from dogs recreating people during the day. In early years I observed them sleeping on south facing slopes from my bedroom where houses are now. This trail closure protocol continues until April 15th which is supposed to be the end of the calving season. At melt off, the herd can safely move up to graze in the high country. Recreators can have their way with the trail system from April to December when the herd is up having its' way with the tender new growth in the high country. It is a nifty arrangement made well before the development started and Eagle Ranch filled with residents who surely would have opposed such a limitation on their freedoms. This photo was taken in 2006 as a herd of Elk near the Medical Center decided to cross to Hockett Gulch just a quarter mile from where a major housing development was just approved.

In addition to the Eagle Ranch PUD, the Town adopted an [Eagle Area Open Lands Conservation Plan](#). Each of those polices will be tested as the Haymeadow project across Brush Creek is developed in coming years and as Eagle Ranch approaches build out. It will help that over 3,500 acres of the upper reaches of Brush Creek were protected in 2000 when Adam's Rib sold out to state agencies and when the remainder of Adam's Rib lands in the mid-valley sold as [Brush Creek Open Space](#) to Eagle County in 2017. Most of the valley is protected in ways that adopted comp plans, and wildlife citing NIMBYs when I first arrived here could only have imagined. These were monumental wins for wildlife over development. I fear it may still have not been enough.

Just as affordable housing needs advocates, so do our wild values. We need to be encouraging of very dense growth in our municipal core areas where wildlife are not expected. This should be the flip side of the wildlife NIMBY advocacy-bring-it-on where development belongs and be deliberate about it as development expands from the core into the margins. Eagle has been considerably more deliberate about wildlife than most towns. I'm proud of that legacy. It is one I enjoy even as I sleep. Even where it has so carefully considered and for all of our comprehensive planning, I fear the elk which wake me in the night only have a fighting chance because of what we dreamed back then.

Jon Stavney

Executive Director

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Advocate, Mediator, Problem Solver, Collaborator, Confidant --- Ombudsman

The Ombudsman program through the Alpine Area Agency on Aging with NWCCOG is a vital safety net for our community citizens residing in long term care. The word "ombudsman" is a Swedish term meaning advocate and the word is uncommon and often misunderstood. Because the Alpine AAA has been quietly growing this program over the last few years, we thought it would be an opportunity to explain just what an Ombudsman does.



Tina Strang - Ombudsman Program Specialist

For a moment, picture a loved one living in a long term care facility. While some facilities may be bright, supportive, and caring places to live, unfortunately, the opposite may also be true. As hard as caregivers, family members, and medical staff may try to maintain a healthy, safe environment, there are times when diverse opinions, dishonorable intentions, oversights, and all-out family feuds can interfere with the wishes and well-being of the resident.

That's where Ombudsmen, like Tina Strang, step in. Her goal is to empower the residents, for whom she advocates, to speak up for themselves when they feel they have no voice. When requested, she may also act decisively on their behalf. Her

priority is to ask the resident what she or he wants and by actively listening to the resident, Tina gathers the facts, listens to their desires, and helps the resident voice what she or he really wants or needs.

Sometimes it's as easy as educating the LTC facility on residents' rights through federal and state regulations. It might also be helping a resident get access to additional support systems like visual assistance aids or transportation. Other times, it can be as difficult as mediating between family members who have significantly different ideas regarding the care of their loved one. In a worst case scenario, it could be as critical as documenting and reporting (with the resident's permission) abuse or neglect.

In some cases, family members can have very different opinions on what is best for their loved one who lives in a facility. These mothers/fathers/brothers/sisters can be caught in the middle, and their voice becomes lost in the uprising of the dissent. Loving those who see things so differently often makes it very difficult for the resident to speak up as to what they want, causing them to go silent in meetings or conferences where their care is discussed. Fear of becoming even more isolated, breaking family ties, or retaliation is a reality that many live with. Trying to overcome the power of this fear by giving the resident a safe place to discuss their wishes and desires allows Tina to mediate the situation by working with staff, family members, and the resident. By the time the dust settles, a resolution can often be found.

Ombudsmen are not mandated reporters, meaning they are not legally required to report any suspicion of abuse or neglect. They must maintain the resident's confidentiality and may only report if given permission by the resident. For this reason, sometimes Ombudsmen go to great lengths and use creative methods to personally observe reports from the residents. In one such case, an Ombudsman hid in a closet to witness neglect/abuse by a staff member to the resident. While that may seem extreme, the action to witness abuse first hand was the best way the ombudsman could document and report the abuse, while maintaining the resident's desire to not report the incidents personally.

When tensions run high, the Ombudsman remains objective, non-judgmental, calming, and completely familiar with the rules and regulations that protect residents' rights. Even though this profession can be an emotional roller coaster, the sense of job satisfaction and meaning is enormous. In Tina's opinion, "This is the most rewarding job I've ever had. The hardest - but most rewarding."

If you or someone you know would like additional information or become a volunteer for the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, reach out to Tina at TStrang@NWCCOG.org.

Life expectancy: Disturbing Trend in America

Do we insist this problem is about personal choice, or a collective issue related to our policies?



Many of our communities have become champions of mental health in recent years. Despite some of our counties boasting the highest longevity rates in the nation, we are still in a crisis in the high country.

[National](#) and Denver news outlets have begun referring to our rural resort region as the [suicide belt](#). Across the country, we are in a public health

crisis, in no small part because of foundational changes in our society which are reflected in our excruciating politics. Apparently, by the usual measures, unemployment and the stock market, we have a healthy economy. These health metrics are a powerful counterpoint to that argument. Many of us are suffering.

[The Washington Post reported](#) this past month, "there is something terribly wrong: Americans are dying young at alarming rates" on a report published in the Journal of the AMA showing a reversal in historical patterns of longevity, primarily in people ages 25 to 64. The findings cut across racial and socio-economic groups. The highest increase in death rate among working age people was 23.3 percent...in New Hampshire! [Vice News](#) citing the same report points to youth dying from overdose and suicide as a primary culprit. We have seen such stats before and said they describe other places, other people. [Gizmodo](#) highlighted the loss of community, financial problems, more expensive health care and less-strict gun laws in America as reasons for the disturbing news in the same report. It is becoming clear to those who watch that this is not an isolated trend. [The National Review](#), "[U.S. Life Expectancy Drops for Third Consecutive Year Largely Due to Alcoholism, Drugs and Suicide](#)" says it all in the headline while also reporting that U.S. fertility rates declined in 2018 for the fourth straight year. We are not well.

Various groups will find what they want from the report.

A report published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#), reveals a broad erosion in health, with no single "smoking gun," said Ellen Meara, a professor at the Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice.

"There's something more fundamental about how people are feeling at some level - whether it's economic, whether it's stress, whether it's deterioration of family," she said. "People are feeling worse about themselves and their futures, and that's leading them to do things that are self-destructive and not promoting health."

The findings are significant as the rising death rate overlaps states that are hotly contested in the 2020 presidential elections. Certainly not the sole cause, but a

contributing factor we will continue to talk about this shared problem and address it locally.

'Can't be Bipartisan' means Senators not doing their jobs.

More than 400 bills have passed the House this session only to lie sitting on Mitch McConnell's desk as he focuses all Senate effort on confirming conservative judges. We don't see any whiff of bipartisanship these days in Congress. The White House which could have been a wild card between the parties, has taken a cue from this and chosen sides. The reward is an impeachment in which McConnell has abdicated his



Constitutional pledge as a check & balance to the other executive branch of government. He said on Hannity this weekend that his chamber will take cues from the White House on how to manage the investigation and hearings. This is a victory lap for McConnell who bragged about not wanting to give President Obama a single victory in the Senate, and blocking all judicial nominees.

Other Senators have openly stated they have not intention of being fair --- they are voting against impeachment and for the president -- no matter what.

This is not business as usual, folks. Change will require a much different national conversation than we seem to be capable of lately, because the trends point to basic flaws in our national policy.

These underscore the urgency of us reclaiming the national conversation from our bloated leaders.

For the first time since the passage of the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts in the early 1970's, [what is indicated in these reports](#) is probably THE most important issue in this election year.

Words of hope and encouragement - two books of uplift....

If our cultural health crisis is one of "belonging,"
Braving the Wilderness has recommendations

If you want a short, encouraging read this winter, I suggest Brene' Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* which provides coaching on one of the most caustic things we have recently allowed back into mainstream politics and to the detriment of our health.

The relationships in which social media and tribal politics drive us are unfulfilling. They may invoke our fears. They don't bind us. Brown says, "we've simply started hanging out with people who hate the same people we do. That's not connection.

That's "either you are with us or against us." This kind of willful separation is equivalent of a pack of cigarettes a day. We are in Mad Men politics today. Brown has many recommendations in BRAVING (which is an acronym). Some of the easiest to remember are:

1. People are hard to hate close-up. Move in
2. Speak truth to bullshit. Be civil.
3. Hold Hands. With Strangers.
4. Strong Back. Soft Front. Wild Heart.

She writes as a psychologist who didn't intend to comment on this political moment. I'm glad she has weighed in.

Yearning for a story of true connection leading to living a more fulfilling life - try, *The Book Of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*

This book is the ultimate tome on friendship, kindness, civility, joy, laughter, and gentle living. Written by Doug Abrams as he is allowed full access to 5 days when two old friends get together -- for possibly the last time. The Dahli Lama, and Desmond Tutu meet to spend time reveling in each other's company - soaking up the love, honor, and respect they have for each other. One of the best parts of the story is that they DON'T always see eye to eye.

But here is what they always do:

1. Listen more than talk.
2. Exhibit empathy and compassion.
3. Cultivate connections.
4. Genuinely seek to understand the other's perspective.

They also hold hands with each other -- a lot.

A true book of joy and peace -- perfect for this time of year and celebration of the Holidays.

Could there be a link between sleeping on the street and sleeping in a Manger?



Earlier this week, the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) refused to take up an appeal, leaving in place the 9th Circuit Court decision that says cities can't ticket homeless folks for sleeping on public property until there are enough shelters for all who are in need. The lower court ruled the law violates the Constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

Cities along the west coast and within the jurisdiction of the 9th circuit are scrambling to find solutions to "campers in public spaces." They can no longer treat homelessness as a crime. And lest

we think it's a big win for the homeless - no one could argue that sleeping on the streets is anything but a dangerous, untenable situation for all.

Even in our rural areas, there are homeless issues. A recent article in this newsletter highlighted efforts in [Summit County](#) to allow people a safe, legal place to sleep in their cars. It seems like such a small step up from sleeping in a tent -- but people feel like they have a home -- even on four wheels.

The real problem, that we all continue to struggle with is that people not only cannot afford a place to live, but even if they could - there are not enough places to house the high numbers of working poor. People do not have access to the services they need. Until the root problem is addressed, people will be sleeping in the streets.

So, did SCOTUS make the right call? Maybe. We do know that folks will not be ticketed for being homeless, nor can it be crime. At this time of year, some might view it as analogous to sleeping in their own version of a warm stable.

Merry Christmas from the NWCCOG

FIRST 2020 NWCCOG COUNCIL MEETING

Thursday, January 23, 2020

Full Council, EDD Board & NLF Board Meeting

Location: Colorado Mountain College Vail Valley, 150 Miller Ranch Rd., Edwards, CO

Time: 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

Primary Agenda Items: Introduction of new members/representatives; elect executive committee & officers; annual NLF Board meeting; EDD Board meeting & election of officers.

Northwest Colorado Council of Governments

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