



Shaping the Future of the West

A story about transformational land-use planning in the rural West

Home Grown

Land-use planning evolves and adapts in unlikely corner of Wyoming

By Samuel Western

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Sheridan County, Wyoming, has long been known for its scenery, for “beautiful valleys in their virgin purity and richness,” as city of Sheridan founder John Loucks wrote rather dramatically in 1882.

Nestled on the east flank of the Bighorn mountains on the Montana border, Sheridan County’s topography ranges from the rugged and dry Powder River breaks to 11,000-foot spires on the edge of the Cloud Peak Wilderness Area. It contains some of the best grazing land in the state. With an average elevation of 3,742, it has a longer growing season than many Wyoming counties. Gardens actually include tomatoes.

Sheridan County also has something else: coal. In 1973, driven by the shock of the Middle East oil embargo, coal seams previously deemed uneconomical gained attention. “Massive mining operation rumored,” shrieked an above-the-fold story in a December 1973 Sheridan Press.

Opposition to the mine rose and land planning in Sheridan County began in earnest. There had been planning talk since the 1960s but little action. With the prospect of a coal mine, the county’s land use plan grew from a discussion to – more than 30 years later – what many people say is one of the most effective smart growth land plans in the Rocky Mountain west.

This transition came about because Sheridan County has its own version of rugged western independence. The county is solidly Republican and you’ll never hear a syllable of disregard concerning guns or property rights from any politician. However, when challenges arise, the county doesn’t seem to have much trouble asking for advice, even if it comes from, you know, the outside.

When it came to land planning, Sheridan County eventually turned to the Sonoran Institute, a Tucson-based organization that aims to help fast-changing western communities retain their core land, scenic, and cultural values.

The appearance of the Sonoran Institute as a latecomer wasn’t accidental. As executive director Luther Propst said about the Sonoran Institute’s entrance into any land planning process: “We usually don’t come to a community unless invited and its citizens are ready to deal with challenges. We want to be effective.”

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Land use planning in Sheridan County would not be described as ripe in the 1970s. After the announcement of a possible coal mine – it never happened – and talk of managing boom-like growth, Dick Mader of Gillette came to a land use meeting in Sheridan in May of 1974.

He walked to the microphone 10 times to warn people against the evils of land use planning. “Think before you give up your freedom,” he said. He later wrote a letter to the Sheridan Press saying that, “People who support government land planning would make Karl Marx clap his hands with glee.”

Yet an historic appreciation for agriculture clashed with a hands-off-our-land attitude. When members of the State Land Use Commission showed up at the Sheridan High School auditorium on November 24, 1975, 100 people appeared and nearly every group indicated a wish to conserve prime “agriculture bottomlands for agricultural purposes,” wrote one reporter.

This push/pull – worries about land use planning vs. losing alfalfa fields to coal mining or subdivisions – played out in various dramas in Sheridan County for a quarter of a century. Underlying this dynamic lay the specter of subsistence living. While it has pockets of wealth, Sheridan County had been losing population since 1950, especially in the key 19-34 year-old demographic. The county budget operated on a shoestring. Any additional form of government, even in boom time, was viewed with suspicion.

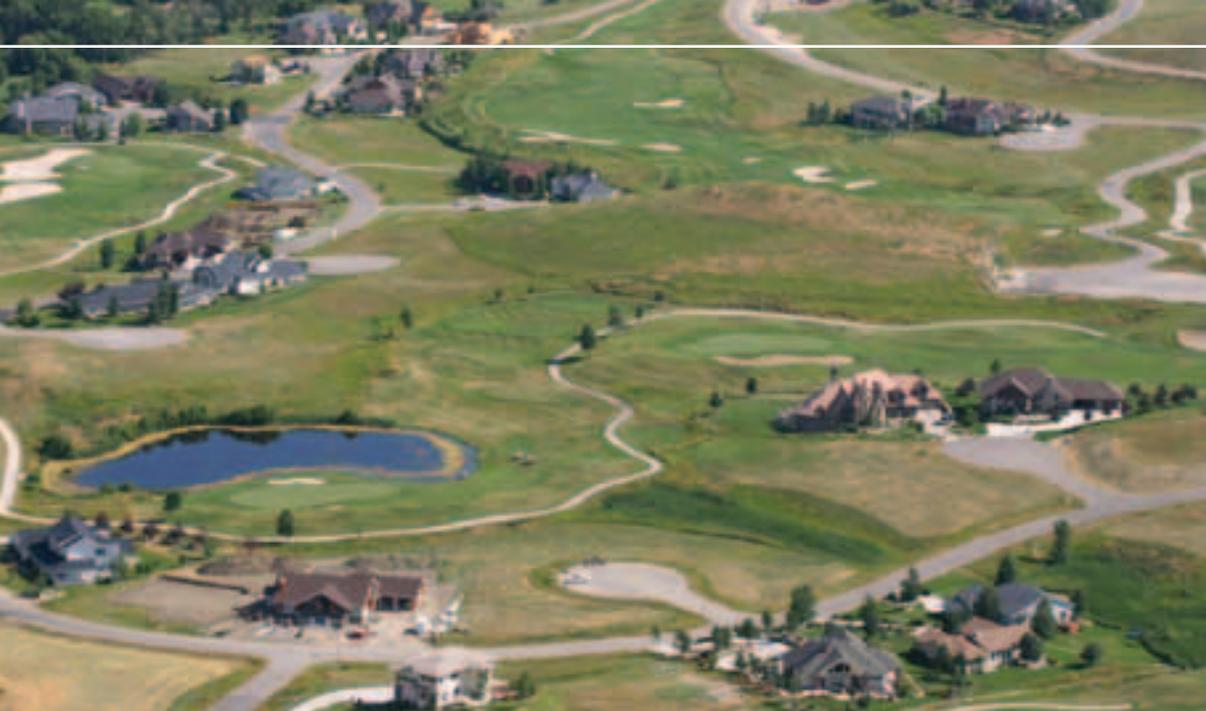
The first comprehensive plan for Sheridan County, issued in 1979, was no exception. Modest in scope and with little teeth, it served, “as a common guide for county development,” and a “means of communication.”

Moreover, some felt the county was merely fulfilling an obligation. In 1975, the Wyoming Legislature enacted the State Land Use Planning Act, a law that required county land use plans. Zoning remained voluntary.



Photo courtesy of Dave Wedum





Powderhorn Golf Community
Sheridan, Wyoming

“I recall we wrote a plan because the state mandated it,” said Pete Frith, who sat on the Sheridan County Commission at the time. “We put it off as long as we could.”

But change was afoot. Sleepy Sheridan faced a new problem: how to accommodate its booming population. Even though the coal mine in question never opened, strong energy prices actuated landmen, geologists, and seismograph crews to crawl over northern Wyoming looking for gas, oil, and additional coal deposits. Between 1970 and 1980, Sheridan County had an incendiary 40.3 percent population growth rate. The county did not keep housing records until 1991, but housing permits in the city of Sheridan rose from 30 in 1973 to 329 in 1978.

Sheridan County amended its comprehensive plan in fits and starts, although the concept of protecting remaining open space grew more defined. The updated 1982 comprehensive plan identified specific protection for the face of the mountains, otherwise known as the Big Horn Foothills Resource Conservation Area.

“When I look at the 1982 comprehensive plan and the plan we have now (last amended in 2008), I see that core or base values have changed little,” said Mark Reid, planner for Sheridan County. “People in this county have always wanted to protect open space.”

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New school under construction in Sheridan, Wyoming. Photo courtesy of Modern-Electric of Sheridan.

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The county put zoning in place in 1985, and then promptly faced an energy bust. City housing starts shrank to 11 units in 1985. Planning ambitions rose and fell. In 1977, the commissioners, with no public discussion, had dismantled the Sheridan Area Planning Agency in a single meeting. In 1983, the commissioners hired a planner, then took away his authority and made him county grantsman.

“There wasn’t much impetus to pay attention to the county plan,” said Ken Kerns, a longtime rancher who formerly sat on the county commission.

Then, a pair of wake up calls. In 1994, readers of the Sheridan Press choked on their afternoon coffee at the headline: “700 Homes Planned for Subdivision.” The Powderhorn, the last working ranch between Sheridan and the tiny unincorporated town of Big Horn, had been sold to a local developer and bank president. The buyer, Homer Scott, Jr., envisioned a golf course and one of the biggest vacation-home developments Wyoming had ever seen.

The county commissioners tweaked the plan and whittled the Powderhorn Golf Community, as it was called, down to a 600-unit PUD (Planned Unit Development). “We were excited because for the first time in a while we had a chance to increase the tax base of Sheridan County,” said Kerns. The commissioners approved the Powderhorn, despite legal challenges to the plan, and the Wyoming Supreme Court backed their decision.

A second development signaled another significant shift for Sheridan County: coal-bed methane. In the late 1980s, energy companies began experimenting with ways to extract the methane gas that gathers within the vast coal seams directly east of Sheridan. Within 10 years, the experiment turned into a boom. Companies drilled thousands of wells, most within a 125 mile radius of the city of Sheridan. With them came pipelines, power lines, and subdivisions.

In 1999, county commissioners Charlie Whiton and Steve Cox attended a four-day growth management workshop held by the Sonoran Institute’s Western Community Stewardship Forum.

“It opened my eyes,” said Whiton. “I’d lived here for 45 years, but it never occurred to me to use conservation easements, for example. I was fascinated. There was no sales pitch or anything like that. Their (the Sonoran Institute’s) message was more



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Luther Propst, Sonoran Institute Executive Director



John Heyneman, Wyoming Program Manager for the Sonoran Institute (r), talks with Sheridan residents about the community.

like: here’s what people are doing in other places and you might want to look at it. I had very positive feelings,” he said.

The county commissioners eventually invited the Sonoran Institute to Sheridan to hold a Successful Communities Workshop in September and October, 2003.

“It was a confluence of things, really,” said Propst. “It seemed like the right time. The county has a history of conservation values and progressive leadership – at least by Wyoming standards. There was just the right amount of interest. There was also an opportunity to apply lessons that we had learned elsewhere.”

“We went into Sheridan County with the attitude that they are going to solve everything on their own. We were just there to lay the foundation,” he said.

The first two workshops established a common understanding of the community, according to Randy Carpenter, associate director of the Sonoran Institute’s Northern Rockies Program. “We talked about the planning processes and outcomes to date, existing socio-economic models, natural resources, and the county’s economic, population, and development trends. The third and final workshop consisted of discussing the various tools that would allow Sheridan County to implement their plan,” he said.

The 200 attendees included county commissioners, officials from the city of Sheridan and the surrounding towns of Dayton and Ranchester, business owners, ranchers, homeowners, educators, and other interested citizens.

It wasn’t 1974 all over again. “One of the things I noticed was there weren’t many naysayers,” said Ky Dixon who sat on the county commission and attended the workshops. “It wasn’t a battle. What I remember is people asking question after question.”

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Chris Duerksen, former Managing Director
Clarion Associates

“At such meetings,” said Carpenter, “it’s hard for individuals to stand up and demagogue when it’s perceived that matters are being addressed reasonably, especially when business and agricultural leaders are in the same room.”

The end product impressed Dave Kinskey, who attended the workshops as a private citizen but was elected mayor of Sheridan in 2004. The final Sonoran Institute report was

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pragmatically brief – 10 pages – but, in Kinsky’s words, “It did one of the best jobs I’ve ever seen of putting people’s words into possible actions. It was a road map.”

Planning efforts began to pick up speed, forced to do so by necessity’s iron hand. From 2000-2008, Sheridan County platted 86 new subdivisions.

The county commissioners asked the Wyoming Rural Development Council to conduct a survey and needs assessment. The WRDC asked many of the questions that arose from the 2003 Sonoran Institute conference: What do you think are the major problems and challenges in Sheridan? And, where would you like to see Sheridan County 20 years from now?

It also set the stage for the creation of the Sheridan Community Land Trust (SCLT), which Propst calls one of the most flexible and effective land trusts in the nation. Focusing on smaller landowners, executive director Colin Betzler said his organization probably is more flexible than most. “We really try to explore what options are most beneficial to the public and landowner,” he said.

In December 2008, the county issued an updated comprehensive plan that recommended new rules and incentives for subdivisions built on agricultural land. The commissioners focused on conservation subdivision design, a concept that features clustered housing development. This idea, which has been around since medieval times and popular for decades in New England, had been slow in coming to the West. The basic principle of cluster development, as described by Randall Arendt, regarded by many as the father of conservation subdivision design, “is to group new homes onto part of the development parcel so that the remainder can be preserved as unbuilt open space.”

The county hired Clarion Associates, a national land-use and real estate consultancy firm, to act as advisors on this updated plan.

“Those commissioners went about it in the right way,” said Chris Duerksen, a former managing director at Clarion. “They planned first and did a huge amount of public participation. They also made some very important decisions, primarily that Sheridan County was not in the urban services business. Those commissioners are by-and-large conservative and they took a thoughtful and thorough look at the implications for delivering costs all over the county,” he said.



Historic WYO Theatre, Sheridan, Wyoming



No sooner was the 2008 plan approved when commissioners began acting on the priorities spelled out in it. They didn't discuss matters within the confines of their offices, either. "We made it a public process and begged people to come," said Terry Cram, who currently sits on the commission.

"We also needed a good public opinion poll," said Cram, "something we, as commissioners, could really hang our hat on. The Sonoran Institute came and, with their own money, paid for such a poll."

The poll, co-sponsored by the Nature Conservancy, was conducted in June 2010 by Public Opinion Strategies of Alexandria, Virginia. It showed that 78 percent of participants indicated that clustering is an "acceptable" way to implement the comprehensive plan. In addition, 60 percent agreed on "strengthening current rules to ensure that in agricultural areas no more than one house is built per 80 acres in order to maintain the rural character of the county."

The same month, the SCLT and the Sonoran Institute, in conjunction with the Nature Conservancy and the Wyoming Business Council, sponsored a Muddy Boots on the Ground conference with Arendt.

After a series of meetings and hearings, the commissioners put teeth into the 2008 plan. In November 2010, after a 10-month public process, the county reduced the number of homes allowed in rural areas of the county from one per 35 acres to one per 80 acres.

While it meant goodbye to unchecked rural sprawl in Sheridan County and possible easy profits for developers, "the commissioners used lots of sweetener and incentives," said Duerksen. "For example, if you use a conservation design subdivision, the process gets streamlined. You get to build one house on 40 acres. The density could be even higher if the property is located within a conservation development area."

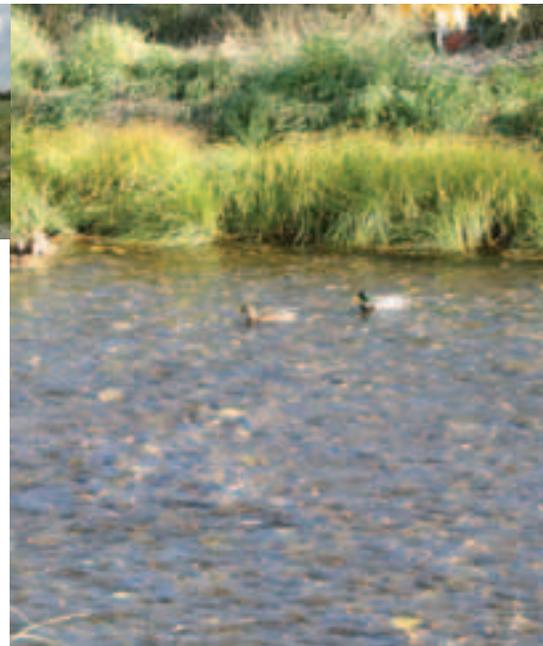
Cram deems such incentives as critical. "You can't force people to create open spaces," he said. "Sheridan County is an example of how planning should be done. It's one of the best land plans in the west."



Before and after photos of the Woodland Park Subdivision construction in 2008 (Photo courtesy of Centennial Collaborative of Sheridan)

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While counties have recently been urged by organizations like Building the Wyoming We Want to revamp their land use plans, no county has been as successful as Sheridan County.

For example, Sheridan County successfully reduced the number of homes allowed in rural areas of the county from one per 35 acres to one per 80 acres. Only Carbon County attempted such a reduction, downzoning, as it is termed, in the year 2000 by raising the minimum lot size from 35 to 640 acres in areas classified as open range.

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The downzoning was repealed in 2008, according Sid Fox, Planning Director for Carbon County Planning, and it’s now down to a 35-acre minimum lot size.

Duerksen is not alone in his praise of Sheridan County’s land use planning. In September 2011, the Wyoming Planning Association gave Sheridan County its Urban Planning Project of the Year award. It gave the award, said spokeswoman Meagan Lehman, in recognition of Sheridan County’s outstanding planning project in a population base under 25,000. “The winner... must show they promoted solid principles and practices that lead to results. They also must show citizen involvement and community support,” she said.

What this means is that the world is watching. “Sheridan is a fantastic example,” said Propst, adding that such sophisticated land planning usually happens in wealthier, recreation-focused areas of the West, such as Red Lodge, Montana or a college town like Bozeman. “There need to be more examples of this level of planning in areas that don’t have a ski area or a university.”

The work goes on. The land planning agenda for Sheridan County currently includes distinctly non-glitzy subjects such as rural septic systems and wastewater treatment. And yet, such pro-active attention to common tasks lies at the heart of Sheridan County’s land planning success.

Samuel Western is a freelance writer living in Sheridan, Wyoming.

The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of Western North America. For more information, visit www.sonoraninstitute.org

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