High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

How to fix exclusive resort towns

It's time to rethink urbanization in mountain communities.

Auden Schendler | **OPINION** | **Nov. 30, 2016** | *Web Exclusive*

This fall, a landscape architect named Nick stood up at a town meeting in Basalt, in western Colorado, where I live. He said he'd sold his condo and was probably the last young professional to ever try to live here.

He griped that the community had abandoned urban planning, forsaking people like him and putting the town's future at hazard: No affordable places to live, no reasonably priced offices, and the council wanted to convert much of the town core into a park.

How did we get here?

People who choose to live in the West do so because they appreciate its natural beauty. Many labored to protect it, as developers filled green spaces with subdivisions. Some smaller towns got wise: They created urban growth boundaries, protected open space, and established zoning to preserve character. Eventually, though, the problems facing people like Nick — along with the traffic — metastasized.

In Basalt, Colorado, there's no place to go but up.

Lena Nicholson/Flickr user

The issue was the way town governments and their electorate saw the world. “No growth” and “land preservation” were their hammers, and every challenge was a nail. Even today, if you want to win an election, it’s smart to run on a platform of “protecting small town character.” Use the term “slow growth” as a dog-whistle that means no growth. Oppose sprawl. Oppose density. Oppose height.

Congratulations, you’ve won! But now you’ve inherited a mess of your own creation. Like Aspen, you have gridlock traffic from bedroom communities down-valley. Like Jackson, Wyoming, you have a crisis-level worker housing shortage. Like Telluride, your land values are now worth more than the silver underground. The result: Banks become more viable than bakeries, luxury condos displace lodges. As in Boulder, Colorado, the problem is exacerbated because high buildings were deemed ugly and out of character. Your police chief commutes from 30 miles away, your teachers and nurses and carpenters from even greater distances. And the community believes it’s got to close the doors.

But opposing density and height under the guise of historical preservation and environmentalism is what created Aspen’s West End, where empty single-family mansions surround empty parks. It’s literally a museum of an old mining town. Has this neighborhood been “saved”?

[RELATED:http://www.hcn.org/articles/rental-crunch-in-mountain-towns-forces-workers-into-woods]

Urban policy reporter Emily Badger writes in the *Washington Post* that the notion that a

place is “full” is more about perception than reality: “We can always make choices to make more room, to build taller and denser, to upgrade schools and rethink roads to let more people in. That we don’t isn’t a limitation of physics. It’s a matter of politics disguised as physics.”

The politics creates inequality. Why should one person be allowed to live in Shangri-La, and not another? And since you can’t actually stop people from coming in, a “close the doors” land-use policy means only rich people can play.

The *New York Times* reported that “a growing body of economic literature suggests that anti-growth sentiment, when multiplied across countless unheralded local development battles, is a major factor in creating a stagnant and less-equal American economy.”

Meanwhile, developers are forced by space constraints and zoning into smart growth. These projects add height and density inside the town core, with smaller size and selective deed-restriction creating affordable housing for young families and encouraging foot traffic. But though they provide exactly what towns need, townspeople don’t welcome developers. Instead, they resist them, seeing the same villains that ruined Denver, Phoenix and Los Angeles.

Of course, mountain communities can’t accommodate all the people who might want to live here. But many towns haven’t tried all that hard. Aspen Skiing Company, which operates in Aspen and Snowmass, lacks beds for 600 workers. Yet when writer James Howard Kunstler suggested Aspen ought to add another story to the downtown, he was swiftly run out of Dodge.

Recently, the White House weighed in. The Times reported that the administration published “a toolkit of economic evidence and policy fixes to help local … leaders fight back against the NIMBYs that … hold sway over municipal zoning meetings … (calling) for more density, speedier permitting and fewer restrictions on … basement and garage apartments. The plan rejects some of the arguments made by environmentalists, labor unions and other liberal constituencies.”

But the battle roils on. In Aspen, voters have fought off several hotels that would have replaced guest rooms lost as older lodges converted to condominiums. Instead, Aspen gets townhomes. These buildings often sit empty or invite car travel, which hotels do not.

This result might be just what townspeople want. Mountain and resort communities are increasingly occupied by older, wealthier people. Peace and quiet is what they prefer. But do these residents only care about numbers, and not community character? The places we live, absent families, young people, commerce and foot traffic, can't really be described as towns, much less communities. They are, instead, locations in which to reside, "houses," as Nick has noted, "with no rooms, just four walls and no doors."

Auden Schendler is a contributor to Writers on the Range, the opinion service of High Country News. *He is a town councilman in Basalt, Colorado, and a vice president at Aspen Skiing Company.*

Note: the opinions expressed in this column are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of High Country News, its board or staff. If you'd like to share an opinion piece of your own, please write Betsy Marston at betsym@hcn.org (mailto:betsym@hcn.org).