Attachment #7

COLORADO
Parks and Wildlife
Department of Natural Resources

Steamboat Springs Service Center
925 Weiss Dr.
Steamboat Springs, CO 80487
P 970-870-2197 | F 970-871-2853

January 1, 2019

Rebecca Bessey
City of Steamboat Springs
137 10th Street
PO Box 775088
Steamboat Springs, CO 80477

RE: Zone Map Amendment Application PS18-0151 Submittal Requirement #4, West Steamboat Neighborhoods Detailed Narrative.

Dear Ms. Bessey,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed development of the West Steamboat Neighborhoods (WSN). Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on projects that may have impacts to wildlife.

CPW recognizes that the West Steamboat Springs Area Plan (WSSAP) provides guidance to preserve natural features and wildlife within the West Steamboat area. WSSAP section 2.8.2 further explains this development will be following guidelines in the Wildlife Resources section of the Routt County Master Plan, which requires a Wildlife Mitigation Plan that is reviewed and approved by the Colorado District Wildlife Manager, as part of major subdivisions or major subdivision exemptions (more than 4 lots) (Policy 9.3.F). CPW looks forward to working with the City of Steamboat Springs to develop a mitigation plan for the WSN project.

CPW is responsible for conserving wildlife and habitat to ensure healthy, sustainable populations and ecosystems. CPW recognizes that the human population is growing and expected to continue to grow across Colorado and this requires municipalities to explore development opportunities to meet future needs. Development to the north and west of Steamboat Springs is likely to impact a variety of wildlife species and habitat.

Wildlife Use and Associated Impacts

Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse

The area included in the WSN project is within Columbian sharp-tailed grouse overall range, production area (nesting and brooding areas where females raise young), and an active grouse lek (the location where male grouse display for females and reproduction occurs). Columbian sharp-tailed grouse have not been observed on the Steamboat 700 lek site for two years, but it is not uncommon for lek sites in this area to shift from year to year. Columbian sharp-tailed

grouse have been observed in the general area during the spring breeding season as recently as the spring of 2018.

Associated impacts of WSN development to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse include possible abandonment of the existing lek site, nesting and brooding habitat loss, overall habitat loss, and habitat fragmentation. CPW's 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) has identified residential and commercial development as the greatest threat to Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. Urbanization leads to fragmentation and the loss of native cover at lek sites, nesting and brooding areas, and winter habitat, rendering urban landscapes unsuitable for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse (Hoffman, 2001). CPW's 2015 SWAP identifies Columbian sharp-tailed grouse as a species of highest conservation priority in the state (Tier 1 Species). Any loss of Columbian sharp-tailed grouse habitat is significant for the species and the state. The level of human development proposed, 450 homes, may disturb Columbian sharp-tailed grouse to a degree that they will no longer use the area associated within the WSN for any life-cycle functions.

Rocky Mountain Elk

The project area for the WSN is currently elk summer range, elk winter range, and overall elk range. Elk summer range is the area where elk raise their calves and rebuild fat stores to survive winter months. Winter range is the area where elk survive during the winter months. Elk herds are sensitive to any disturbance while on winter range and are sensitive to the loss of winter range habitat.

Associated impacts of WSN development to elk include loss of summer range, loss of winter range, and loss of overall range. The elk that currently use the area within the future WSN development will likely be pushed into the surrounding areas which create the potential to cause agricultural producers to experience increased conflict with elk damaging irrigated alfalfa/hay meadows, damage to haystacks, and competition with livestock for hay distributed in feed lines.

Mule Deer

Mule deer currently use the area where WSN is planned for summer range, migration patterns, and overall range. Mule deer summer range is where mule deer does (females) give birth to fawns, raise fawns, and build fat reserves to survive the winter months. Migration patterns are areas known to be important to the migration of a herd. Mule deer typically do not spend the winter in the eastern half of Routt County; they migrate to western Routt County or Moffat County.

Impacts to mule deer are likely to include loss of summer range, migration patterns, and overall range. The anticipated 450 homes will likely discourage mule deer from giving birth and raising fawns in the WSN area. Mule deer that do attempt to give birth and raise young in the WSN are likely going to be in conflict with humans and dogs.

Moose

The WSN project is within existing moose overall range. Moose sightings north and west of Steamboat Springs have been increasing in frequency with several sightings as far west as the town of Hayden.

Housing development in moose habitat creates the potential for human-moose conflict and dog-moose conflict. Ornamental shrubs frequently attract moose and bring moose into close proximity to humans and dogs. Moose are known to be potentially aggressive towards dogs which can also be hazardous to people in the vicinity.

Pronghorn Antelope

The WSN area overlaps with existing pronghorn overall range. Pronghorn are likely to use the area during spring, summer, and early fall months. Any pronghorn in the area migrate to the west during winter months.

Impacts to pronghorn may include displacement to the surrounding area during spring, summer, and early fall months. Pronghorn may also be impacted by a barrier to movement to the west by buildings, roads, and fences associated with WSN.

Black Bear

The WSN planned development is within current summer concentration, fall concentration, overall range, and human conflict area for black bears. Black bears spend a large portion of their time feeding in both the summer concentration and fall concentration areas.

Development in and around black bear habitat is likely to cause human-bear conflicts when trash and other food attractants (grills, bird feeders, apiaries, chicken coops, and fruiting trees and shrubs) are available to black bears. Black bears are also able to access food attractants in unlocked vehicles and through unlocked or open windows and doors in homes and garages. When a community or neighborhood does not remove food attractants and prevent access to trash, it will attract black bears and other wildlife. When people and black bears are in close proximity it increases the chances that individual animals will become habituated to humans and potentially dangerous to human safety.

CPW recommends that all homes and commercial buildings within the WSN development only use Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) bear-resistant trash containers for all trash storage. CPW further recommends that other food attractants are removed and reduced to the extent possible. Strategies for removal of food attractants to black bears and other wildlife include; keeping cooking grills clean and moving inside after use, only using bird feeders during winter months, ensuring that apiaries are protected with functional electric fencing, ensuring that chicken coops are protected with functional electric fencing, and plant only non-fruiting trees and shrubs. Occasionally black bears attempt to den underneath homes and open ended porches. CPW recommends constructing porches and buildings to prevent any wildlife the opportunity to den underneath.

Mountain Lion

WSN planned development is currently within mountain lion overall range. Mountain lion movement is closely associated with prey availability, specifically deer, elk, and other small mammals.

Development in existing mountain lion habitat creates the potential for human-lion conflict if there are food attractants to mountain lions. Bird feeders, fruiting trees and shrubs, and small ponds can attractant small mammals that mountain lions are likely to prey upon.

CPW recommends removing food attractants and keeping brush away from homes and garages to further discourage mountain lions from spending any time near people or their homes.

Cumulative Impacts

Development displaces the species of wildlife listed above, as well as a variety of other wildlife species, small mammals, song bird species, and raptors. Development disturbs the existing plant and insect community that wildlife relies on for survival. Wildlife species within the planned WSN may not be directly taken by the development; however, when wildlife is displaced it adds stress and competition to the wildlife in the surrounding habitat. As development continues throughout Routt County and the state, wildlife will continue to be pushed to smaller and smaller pieces of fragmented habitat. CPW encourages the City of Steamboat Springs to consider the cumulative impacts of development and to use conservation minded development practices such as clustering homes and designing large wildlife corridors to allow wildlife to move across the landscape with the least amount of disturbance possible.

Wildlife Habitat Improvement Local District - Endowment Fund

CPW has started the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Local District (WHILD) endowment fund which is managed through the Yampa Valley Community Foundation. The purpose of this fund is to improve and enhance wildlife habitat in areas critical for survival, forage, and refuge. This fund embraces a philosophy that recognizes the importance of connecting people to the outdoors and how human activity and development have an impact on our natural resources. The fund allows our community, land managers, and conservation agencies to consider the effects of activities that are contrary to minimizing human disturbance on the landscape. The fund can be used for habitat improvement projects, natural resource law enforcement, and research.

Several successful habitat improvement projects have been implemented in the Steamboat Springs area. These projects were the result of a collaborative effort between the United States Forest Service, CPW, Colorado State Forest Service, and the City of Steamboat Springs. These habitat improvement projects focused on a variety of factors that benefited wildlife; increased diversity of flora to improve forage for a variety of species; creating diverse vegetative mosaics by removing decadent monocultures; improving understory for small mammals; habitat for passerines and nesting birds. New projects could include spring and water development and the planting of native species and high quality forage. The only drawback to these projects is the lack of adequate funding to continue. A habitat improvement project completed today will likely need to be repeated again in two decades. An endowment fund can help solve this problem by having a fund that is perpetual and will benefit wildlife and our natural resources for the long-term.

CPW encourages and recommends that any new disturbance to wildlife and habitat in the WSN project area be offset with habitat improvement work in areas where wildlife are most constrained during critical periods of the year and in areas where improving habitat can help increase the probability of over winter survival. CPW would appreciate the opportunity to

engage in collaborative discussions to solve how this Wildlife Habitat Improvement Fund should be funded and utilized to offset the impacts from human development.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations related to the West Steamboat Neighborhoods development. For any further questions regarding this matter, please contact District Wildlife Manager Jack Taylor at (970) 846-2798.

Sincerely,

Kris Middledorf, Area Wildlife Manager – Area 10

Cc:
JT Romatzke, Northwest Regional Manager
Jack Taylor, District Wildlife Manager