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OPINION

Many must work toward Hoback's clean water

Guest Shot / By Robert Frodeman and Carlin Girard

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Human behavior and hydrology have collided in the southern reaches of Teton County near Hoback Junction. It's time to pick up the pieces.

Locals struggle to deal with the increasing costs of rising nitrate levels in drinking water as well as managing the wastewater systems believed to be the source of the nitrates. A growing number of public and private water systems have exceeded drinking water standards for nitrate.

Recent accounts of the Hoback RV Park demonstrate that water issues extend beyond human health and infrastructure. This is also a matter of social justice: who is responsible for filling this hole we have dug?

Right now, some of our community's most vulnerable neighbors are being forced to carry the load — in the depths of winter. Without a comprehensive community approach and governmental support, the cost to the tenants will do little to change the trajectory of the poor groundwater quality and lack of clean drinking water. And the recent purchase of the RV Park suggests that development pressures will need to be addressed as part of any comprehensive solution.

Most basically, momentum is building to resolve these problems because it makes sense that the richest county in the country, and one whose economy and lifestyle is entirely dependent on environmental values, will want to address an environmental need as fundamental as clean water. Water is the lifeblood of this and every community.

Last winter, Teton County and the Teton Conservation District convened the Hoback Drinking Water Stakeholders Group. It held a series of meetings to identify both immediate and long-term solutions to the water quality problem in the area ranging from Hog Island to Camp Creek. The efforts of this group made it clear that southern Teton County has a cohort of people committed to fixing the area's water quality problems.

But it has also become apparent that there are limits to a volunteer driven approach. It is a serious challenge to wrangle constituents who range from Hog Island, south to Roger's Point subdivision, and east to Camp Creek to form a special district — the typical mechanism used to develop rural water systems. Then add the complex regulatory setting in Hoback Junction. All three of the present public water systems require nitrate treatment to meet EPA drinking water standards.

At the same time, the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality and Teton County wastewater violations and investigations are mounting. And the grandfathered development density and existing infrastructure essentially guarantees that these issues will fester until a true alternative is presented.

In Hoback, there is little access to suitable wastewater treatment infrastructure or an alternative drinking water source. Solutions are both costly and complex. Governmental support may be required to help the community of southern Teton County develop a community-scale approach that prioritizes predictability, human health, social justice, and wise water resource stewardship.

Finally, fixing the water quality problems in and around Hoback is likely to be only the next step in the continuing evolution of southern Teton County. The outside world continues to press in upon Teton County. The purchase of the RV Park (and the related purchase of the Virginian and a number of other businesses in the valley) suggest that bigger plans are afoot. The Teton County Comprehensive Plan is now nearly 10 years old, and even the updated version says little about the future of the Hoback Junction area.

Let's continue to work toward the resolution of water quality issues in southern Teton County, being realistic about the need for and limits to governmental support to address the water issues. As we do so, we can also anticipate that development pressures will ramp up and success will require that we come together to envision our common future in Teton County.

Hoback resident Robert Frodeman writes on technology and the environment. Carlin Girard lives in Jackson and works on water resource issues; this is his personal and not professional opinion. Guest Shots are solely the opinion of their authors.