

Gateway Communities

by Edward T. McMahon

Americans are on the move. And a lot of them are heading for the communities that serve as the gateways to our national parks, wildlife refuges, and other public lands. Gateway communities are important not just because they provide food and lodging for Americans on their way to visit national parks and other public lands. They are also portals to our most cherished landscapes. Indeed, they define the park experience for many visitors. Gateway communities are also “ground zero” in the struggle between haphazard development and planned growth.

In the 1990s, two million more Americans moved from metropolitan centers to rural areas than migrated the other way. With their natural beauty and high quality of life, gateway communities have become a magnet for a growing number of Americans. In fact, in recent years rural counties with federally-designated wilderness areas grew six times as fast as counties without designated wilderness areas.

Estes Park, Colorado, gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, and St. Georges, Utah, gateway to Zion National Park, have become havens for retirees looking for picturesque places to spend their golden years. People who want to live close to outdoor recreational opportunities are invading towns like Moab, Utah; Maryville, Tennessee; Blowing Rock, North Carolina and other towns adjoining national parks and wildlife refuges. “East Tennessee has just exploded,” says Randy Brown, a Maryville resident, “and the people moving here all want to live near the park.”

Traverse City, Michigan; Flagstaff, Arizona; Durango, Colorado; Talkeetna, Alaska; and Fredericksburg, Virginia are just a few of the many gateway communities trying to cope with rapid growth. It is not just retirees and telecommuters



View of Mt. Rainer, WA

who are flocking to once isolated gateway communities, it is also an ever growing number of tourists. For example, Bar Harbor, Maine — population 4,500 — copes with nearly four million tourists a year, most of them on their way to nearby Acadia National Park. Likewise, the highway through Jackson, Wyoming, is now the busiest in the state.

In fact, residents of tourism-dependent resort communities are among the hardest hit by rapid growth. In Vail, Colorado three out of every four dwellings are now second homes occupied only a few weeks a year. Most of Vail’s police and firefighters cannot afford to live in or near town. Likewise, in Bozeman, Montana, gateway to Yellowstone National

Park, suburban real estate prices have jumped dramatically from about \$600 an acre in 1981 to over \$10,000 an acre today.

The wave of migration to gateway communities also portends major changes for natural ecosystems and historic landscapes. A 1994 survey of national parks found that 85 percent were experiencing threats from outside their boundaries.¹ Likewise, a report on the National Wildlife Refuge System found that more than half of the country’s refuges and the wildlife that depend on them face external threats to their health and well-being.²

In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, for example, residential subdivisions adjacent to the National Elk Refuge have diminished the grazing habitat of the nation’s largest elk herd. “Sixty head of elk used to winter right where that house is,” says Refuge Manager Mike Hedrick, pointing to a new subdivision on the refuge borders. At the same time, the area has become so popular with outsiders that a typical family earning the county’s average income can no longer afford most of the houses in the area.

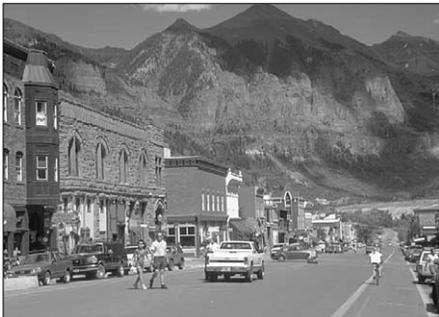


Is this what residents and visitors want to see? Outside Smoky Mountains National Park.

LESSONS FROM GATEWAY COMMUNITIES

Gateway communities offer important lessons for other rural communities grappling with growth and change. Ben Read, a writer in Jackson Hole notes that “these communities are perhaps the first to contend with the limits to growth in an area.” When suburbs get too congested, growth just leapfrogs farther out, but gateway communities often don’t have that option. Much of the land on their outskirts is publicly owned and thus off-limits to development. In an evermore crowded world, the lessons provided by gateway communities will be increasingly valuable to all.

Over the past fifteen years, I’ve worked in scores of gateway communities, and spoken with hundreds of resource managers, elected officials, and local citizens about their experiences, concerns, and ideas. Here’s some of what I’ve learned:



Telluride, Colorado

- Many gateway communities are overwhelmed by haphazard growth that fails to meet local needs or aspirations and detracts from the integrity of public lands.

- The vast majority of gateway community residents, both newcomers and old timers, feel a strong attachment to the landscape and to the character of their town. They want a healthy economy, but not at the expense of their natural surroundings or community character.

- Many residents and local officials feel helpless in the face of rapid change. People know what they like about their communities and what they don’t like about new development. They just don’t know how they can preserve what they



Conservation easements can protect land and scenic vistas. Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

love without saying no to jobs and economic development.

- Perhaps most important, I’ve learned that progress does not demand degraded surroundings. A number of gateway communities have already implemented successful initiatives to cope with rapid growth and high visitation. Across America, dozens of communities are demonstrating that economic prosperity doesn’t have to degrade natural surroundings, rob them of their character, or turn them into crowded tourist traps. Many of these initiatives resulted from partnerships involving both gateway communities and public land managers.

The importance of partnerships can’t be overstated. Gateway communities and resource managers need to cooperate for mutual benefit. This is because the health and quality of park resources generally depend upon their setting within an ecosystem or historic context that often extends well beyond park boundaries. Likewise, the quality of the visitor experience is greatly influenced by the character and aesthetic appeal of neighboring communities. Also, with the changing role of the federal government, public land management agencies are unlikely to have the funds or staff to adequately protect all important natural and cultural resources without the cooperation and support of local officials.

Even many landowners once adamantly opposed to planning and growth management now recognize that no place will retain its special appeal by accident. In fact, the residents of many

gateway communities are starting to recognize that there are only two kinds of change in America: planned change and unplanned change. The question is whether enough communities will recognize this before it’s too late. ♦

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McMahon is also co-author (with Jim Howe of The Nature Conservancy and Luther Propst of the Sonoran Institute) of Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities. The book provides a closer look at how a growing number of gateway communities are beginning to succeed in their efforts at managing intense development pressure. Balancing Nature can be ordered from Island Press by calling: 1-800-828-1302. McMahon and Propst will also be lead instructors in a course specially designed for gateway community planners, land managers, and citizens (June 27-July 1 at the National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, WV). For details, call Jill Delvecchio at: 304-876-7460.

1 National Park Service: Activities Outside Park Borders Have Caused Damage to Resources and Will Likely Cause More (General Accounting Office Report 94-59).

2 National Wildlife Refuges: Continuing Problems with Incompatible Uses Call for Bold Action (General Accounting Office Report 89-196)