

THE LONG GOODNIGHT OF ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

*America's love affair with quaint alpine towns
is facing an existential test as population grows.*

**An NPG Forum Paper
by Mark Cromer**

ABSTRACT

American mountain towns have long been a beloved feature of the nation's geo-cultural landscape, becoming the stuff of lore, like Leadville, Colorado, which attracted iconic figures on both sides of the law like Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp, and Jesse James. America's majestic mountains beckoned members of a new generation once more when the modern era agrarian movement grew in stature during the late 20th century and the counterculture's 'back-to-the-land' movement gained traction, producing notable alpine communes like Black Bear Ranch in Northern California's Klamath Mountains or the Mount Philo commune in Vermont. As the millennium dawned, mountain living in America transformed from a patchwork of eclectic populations that included collectivists, woodsmen, off-the-grid loners, ski bums, writers, and artists into enclaves of the extremely wealthy.

Now, as the nation moves deeper into the 21st Century, mountain towns across the country are feeling the strain of human population growth and face tough choices between preserving what's left of the rustic life that long defined their alpine redoubts and accommodating population surges that are unlikely to soon ebb. The fate of American mountain towns is being decided today in places all over the nation; from the college town of Flagstaff nestled at the foot of Northern Arizona's San Francisco Peaks, to the picturesque village of Gatlinburg in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee; from the old mining town of Leavenworth perched in the Cascade Mountains in Washington, to the beautiful resort town of Stowe tucked into Vermont's Mount Mansfield. How these towns and cities address population growth will determine the future of what *mountain living* will actually mean for generations to come.

*"And the Colorado Rocky Mountain high
I've seen it rainin' fire in the sky
I know he'd be a poorer man if he never saw an eagle fly
Rocky Mountain high..."*
John Denver, 1972

When singer-songwriter John Denver debuted his song *Rocky Mountain High*, an acoustic ode to the enlightened sense of existence that Denver had experienced courtesy of the mountain life that came with living in the Colorado town of Aspen, the song proved to be a Top 10 commercial hit that captured a moment in America when the modern environmental movement was emerging and it became a signature tune in the troubadour's impressive song catalog.

At the time, *Rocky Mountain High* was also widely misinterpreted by many listeners, some of whom seemed to relish imputing the song with a subtext that Denver had never intended. Denver's album, of the same name, was released just one week in front of the Autumnal Equinox in September 1972, but if the apple-cheeked folk artist thought the eco-spiritualism of his lyrical motives would be clear to listeners, he must have been mortified when some on both sides of

the Nixon-era cultural divide pounced to declare the song a thinly veiled paean to illicit drug use.

It wasn't — as Denver would frustratedly explain time and again after some radio networks balked at playing the song for fear of triggering a rebuke from the Federal Communications Commission¹ — but the song's beauty and its actual message of the mountain lifestyle it celebrated ultimately triumphed: Rocky Mountain High would go on to be made one of Colorado's official state songs in 2007, when legislators voted overwhelmingly to make it a sibling state song alongside its original 1915 anthem *Where The Columbines Grow*.²

Despite the momentary controversy, Denver's classic song successfully tapped a deep and enduring affection for the mountains that most Americans have, an abiding attraction that at times seems to be an almost genetic inheritance that triggers a naturally occurring awe at the sight of majestically snowcapped peaks towering above a sweeping deep green veil of pine trees.

The popular affection for mountains has been repeatedly reinforced with a pop art mythology about the glories of living on them, a la *Rocky Mountain High*, and as a result more Americans continue to seek out alpine getaways through all-season adventure trips or the gaudy chic practice of glamping and purchasing or leasing seasonal vacation homes or cabins. Others still are drawn to them powerfully enough that they decide to live full-time in a community that's either literally on a mountain or close enough to its range to be considered a mountain town.

But many of these new residents quickly discover that mountain living, while indeed wondrous on so many levels, also unforgivingly exacts grueling demands upon those who call it "home." Hard winter months can present unanticipated challenges and at times require serious physical work that many Americans living in the cities and throughout modern suburbia never really encounter.

Unless someone experiences a particular thrill when confronted with digging their car out of the snow, de-icing their driveway, shoveling a path to the mailbox, navigating white-knuckle driving on roads made deadly by an invisible coat of 'black ice,' or clearing the roof of their home, they should pause and seriously reflect on what they will be getting into by living in the mountains — even in a larger community that is equipped to help the residents.

John Denver evoked the rustic rush of the campfire, but he didn't sing much about the joy of

chopping and lugging firewood, or planning life-or-death muster points and escape routes in the event of wildfires far enough away from first responder help to give real meaning to the phrase: "You're on your own".

Life on a farm can look idyllic too, until it's time to rise before the sun to milk the cows, toss the feed, and shovel the overnight excrement out of the stalls.

Yet the reality of harsh conditions amid life in the higher altitudes has not dampened Americans' enthusiasm for the mountains and alpine life retains its powerful allure as more people decide that they have had enough of daily life in the teeming cities and throughout the increasingly congested suburbs and all of the social ills that are amplified by high human density.

Many of these Americans are looking for a slower pace in the pastoral heartland, but many are also heading to the mountains.

Precise data on overall migration flow into mountain communities remains difficult to ascertain in terms of national trends since the U.S. Census Bureau does not distill its decennial canvassing results to track population trends in mountain communities as a separate and distinct demographic or offer data distilled from mountain communities as part of the nation's larger patchwork of mountain villages, towns, and cities. The Census Bureau obviously tracks the population of all the mountain communities, such as Aspen in Colorado as well as Leavenworth, Washington, for example, but it doesn't amalgamate the data into a statistical analysis of all such mountain communities around the nation to discern trends in population and profiles of residents.

The U.S. Census Bureau classifies Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico as the Mountain division of the western United States. The region includes much of the Rocky Mountains, which extend north to south through the western United States and into Canada. However, because the Census classification is state based, it does not isolate mountain communities themselves when tracking population trends.

While precise data on the number of mountain towns produced by either government agencies or private entities isn't readily available due to the fluid nature of the definition, computer-assisted analysis using cross-referenced data sets that consider geographic classifications and the altitude of incorporated municipalities that are mapped by Geographic Information Systems along with economic data collected by agencies such as the

Appalachian Regional Commission indicate that there are approximately 2,000 communities across the nation that can be accurately classified as mountain towns. That number can jump to 3,000 depending on variables such as community definitions, but it can also drop to as few as 600 towns if only strictly accounting for cities in the nation's three main mountain ranges.

There are as many as 2,000 towns actually tucked into America's mountain ranges, but that number is certainly larger when the definition of mountain town is expanded to include areas adjacent to alpine ranges that arguably fit the bill by proximity and elevation.

To some observers of social policy, the federal government's lack of a more cohesive and coherent demographic data collection and analysis in America's mountains that might better inform policy initiatives may seem to reflect a strange disinterest. Yet the federal government has, in fact, acknowledged the uniqueness and needs of some mountain communities through its creation of rather obscure agencies such as the Appalachian Regional Commission or the Northern Border Regional Commission, bureaucratic interfaces that are supposed to assist with providing critical services and foster economic development in areas often challenged by the relative isolation and hardship that is often found in mountain communities.

Granular data aside, there are ample indications that the rising tide of pressures associated with population growth is also impacting mountain towns and communities across the country. In some respects, mountainous regions have been able to avoid the dynamic pace of development that consumed vast swaths of desert around Las Vegas or Phoenix, mostly because mountain geography doesn't lend itself to the blitz-building that has exploded elsewhere.

But mountain towns in 2026 are also clearly not immune to the immense pressures generated by population growth. All you have to do is pick a mountain town and take a look around. The changes fueled by population growth are simply unmistakable.

FROM THE ROCKIES TO THE SMOKIES

In the fall of 2025, *Outside Magazine* published an article identifying mountain towns as among the fastest-growing towns in the country, noting that more Americans are moving to rural areas in search of a slower pace of life that feels less crowded.³ The article quickly caught fire, but it also caught heat for some

glaring errors, including inaccurately identifying Sundance, Utah, as a mountain town — it's not, it is the ski resort in Provo Canyon in Utah County that was created by the late actor Robert Redford whose roots on the mountain date to 1961. The resort bears the name of his famous portrayal of the historic gunslinger in *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*. The *Outside* article also placed a Colorado farming town mistakenly on the roster of alpine burgs.

As the magazine's editors scrambled to correct the article's factual biffs, the main thrust of the story was, in fact, accurate. Mountain towns across the United States are facing significant pressures to accelerate the building of high-density, multifamily housing, and to significantly increase the footprint of that housing and its supporting infrastructure as quickly as possible.

Gatlinburg, a small city nestled in the Smoky Mountains of Eastern Tennessee, is currently home to a little more than 3,700 residents and has experienced an annual growth rate of just above 1%, hardly a reason to sound the population explosion alarms — at least not yet. Geography alone affords the picturesque town, which bills itself as the '*Gateway to The Smokies*', at least some natural protection from overdevelopment and Gatlinburg is unlikely to suffer the same fate as Frisco, Texas, the ranching town numbering about 6,000 residents in 1990 that saw its golden fields put to the bulldozer and disappear as a city the size of Washington's Tacoma rose in its place, today numbering more than 235,000 people.⁴

But Gatlinburg is facing a near-term future that bodes ill for preserving the town's longstanding aesthetics that blend small-town American features amid the gorgeous mosaic of trees that provide a vivid multicolored canopy with the arrival of autumn.

To some degree, the town has fallen victim to its own success as a mountain town getaway, seeking to attract visitors willing to open their purses and wallets as they enjoy day-tripping, weekend getaways, and longer-still vacations from the city folk of urban areas all over the nation. That marketing success has led to a superheated short-term rental market that includes more than 7,000 rental cabins, meaning there are more than twice as many cabins catering to out-of-towners as there are people actually living in Gatlinburg.⁵

Those rental cabins supplement more than 40 traditional hotels and motels along Gatlinburg's main drag, which runs little more than two miles. These establishments range from major national chain brands to independent and sometimes family-owned lodging that dates back to the early 20th century. Add

to that all the supporting services and tourism-based businesses, from eateries and outfitters to amusement and entertainment venues, and what the city ends up with is a large volume of service — and hospitality — sector employees who either can't afford to live in Gatlinburg or can't find suitable housing.

Faced with a large number of Gatlinburg workers who are unable to find affordable housing in the town, which forces them to commute from locales outside of surrounding Sevier County, where Gatlinburg is located, demand to develop high density housing to accommodate more of its local workforce is growing. Local officials have responded in the short-term by greenlighting three major multifamily housing developments totaling more than 500 units that are tailored for people working in Gatlinburg and the surrounding area with a variety of others in earlier stages of the pipeline.⁶

With thousands of new residents soon to be living in Gatlinburg proper and nearby among the more than 100,000 people now residing in Sevier County — in 1990 the county population was just half of the current headcount — the inevitable escalation of cascading impacts will be felt across the small mountain town as traffic congestion, noise levels, and loss of natural habitat under the expanding human footprint take their toll. Even light pollution, the phenomenon when exterior lighting from municipal, commercial, and residential sources combine to such a degree during the night that nature's own starlight is either partially or sometimes entirely obscured.

A SWEET ROCKY MOUNTAIN PARADISE

There was a reason that, back in 1972, John Denver was able to marvel in silent awe at nature's own light show after dark that was so vibrant it appeared to be raining fire. Back then, Aspen's population was around 2,400 residents.⁷ Today, Aspen remains a small but far more exclusive mountain town with more than 6,000 residents⁸, and the Perseid meteor showers that reach peak activity in August and streak the night sky with 90 or more shooting stars each hour, can still be enjoyed by residents and visitors. The mountain city of Boulder, however, which also sits within the Rocky Mountain range, albeit in the slightly less-elevated foothills, has nearly doubled in population since the 1970s to a present-day community of more than 105,000 people. The resulting light pollution emanating from Boulder clouds the sky with artificial brightness and forces those who wish to see the unfiltered meteor showers or just enjoy a night of stargazing to drive another

hour or more to higher elevations to view naturally dark skies.⁹

Nearly 1,300 miles to the northwest of Boulder, Colorado, sits the small mountain community of Leavenworth, Washington, the Bavarian-styled city nestled at 1,160 feet in the Cascade Mountains. Home to nearly 2,600 people, residents of Leavenworth and its many visitors are treated to the natural beauty of mountain peaks that tower more than 7,000 feet above sea level.¹⁰ The town has seen ebbs and flows among its standing population, steadily losing residents from the 1950s to the 1970s, then nearly doubling in size by 2010.¹¹

That might seem like a relatively dramatic population shift, but the changes occurred gradually over several decades and Leavenworth's population remains below 3,000 people. That good fortune may be running out as more people flock to Leavenworth, which is about a two-hour drive from the Seattle metroplex that surrounds much of Puget Sound.

As home prices have exploded throughout much of the Pacific Northwest over the past decade and particularly throughout the Puget Sound region that has been supported by thriving tech and aviation sectors, Leavenworth has seen its median home price of \$165,000 in 2000 explode to just under \$1 million in 2026.¹² According to the city's own analysis, homes going up for sale in the town often sell in less than a week and the market of existing housing stock is dominated by monied buyers looking for second-homes and investment opportunities. These cold facts completely lock out employees of the town's service industry workforce. A study conducted for the city in 2020 concluded that while the population and housing stock remained relatively static between 2000 and 2019, the town's job market jumped by 30% even as limited rental units were converted to short-term, non-residential units that catered to the burgeoning tourist and adventure market.¹³

As a result, an increasing number of people working amid the storybook charm of Leavenworth — and thus play a critical role in the success of the mountain town — simply have no other choice but to live somewhere else and endure what are often long commutes.

The consultants' report was not exactly a news flash to the city's leaders, or even state officials in Olympia, who have grappled with an influx of wealthy homebuyers and the impacts on an affordability crisis that has seen an increasing number of residents in the Evergreen State struggle to make ends meet.

Just like Gatlinburg in Tennessee's Smoky Mountains, Leavenworth faces civic pressures fueled by regional population growth, limited housing availability, and increasing demand to live and recreate in the mountains. These pressures are increasing demand for high-density housing that would accommodate more of the city's workforce and allow them to actually live in the community they serve.

There are currently plans for 600-plus multifamily housing units that are moving through Gatlinburg's city planning and development process, a fairly radical increase that has been made possible by a dramatic alteration of the zoning processes that had intentionally limited that style of growth for decades.

The traditional trade-off of sacrificing some city revenue by forgoing aggressive development schemes in order to preserve the rustic quality of mountain life is increasingly being challenged in places like Leavenworth and Gatlinburg by housing pressures fueled by population growth.

THE GREEN MOUNTAIN STATE

Vermont remains the home of some of the nation's most cherished landscapes that radiate with golden and crimson hues each fall. It's a show put on for free by Mother Nature, but it fills cash registers across the state as more than 2.5 million people spend an estimated \$500 million each season to savor the spectacle.¹⁴

Along with its visually decadent plumage and the delicious maple syrup, Vermont is also home to mountain ranges, and the towns that have taken root among them, that harness the reliable winter snowfall into profitable and sought after ski seasons.

Stowe is a small town of about 5,000 people situated near Mount Mansfield, the tallest peak in Vermont at nearly 4,400 feet. With an annual average snowfall approaching 300 inches, the city has taken the liberty to declare itself 'The Ski Capital of The East' and its Stowe Mountain Resort has 116 interconnected ski trails across Mount Mansfield and Spruce Peak that are served by a dozen lifts. During years with solid snowfall, Stowe's ski season can run from November through April.¹⁵

The central dynamics that have gripped mountain towns like Leavenworth in Washington and Gatlinburg in Tennessee are also on full display in Stowe, where the median home prices have shot well north of \$1 million. At the dawn of the millennium, home prices in the town hovered around \$250,000.¹⁶ The conversion of properties to short-term rentals in Stowe have also severely squeezed the stock of

reasonably priced residential rentals for workers in the town and has led to the local workforce facing the harsh reality of: 'You can work here, you just can't live here,' that has prompted many into long commutes from a residence in a town they can afford.

In response, Stowe has several multifamily housing projects in process, from planning stages to ground-breaking, that include conversions of standing former commercial space and proposed demolition of other commercial spaces such as a lumber yard to facilitate the buildout.¹⁷ Yet a study commissioned by the city also identified another feature that has emerged as a signature of mountain towns: Most of the new 500 housing units that were built between 2015 and 2025 "were absorbed as second homes and vacation rentals."¹⁸

Even more striking, the consultants' study determined that Stowe's stock of available housing had exploded in market value so aggressively that it made buying a home in the small town completely "unattainable" for workers in "virtually all local professions."¹⁹ In real world terms, that means even a local lawyer with a solid practice in town would find themselves priced out of their local market with no chance to own there unless they had already bought or were due to inherit property. The study concluded that middle class professionals in Stowe have been completely shut out of the market and can only look for pricey rentals if they don't want to commute.

Among the commissioned study's key findings was a sobering analysis that Stowe needs to build nearly 600 more housing units by 2035 to even keep pace with civic needs – and, perhaps more importantly – satisfy the expansive housing targets state legislation now demands of towns and cities in Vermont. The study showed that 600 more units would actually require building a total of 1,700 more housing units in the small mountain if the town didn't put the brakes on second homes and short-term rentals.²⁰

Consider that for a moment: Stowe has a population of about 5,000 people in its cozy mountain confines, but it will need to add *at least* 1,700 more residential units of every type if the state's demands and town needs are to be met without passing any restrictions on investment properties and rentals.

Just how much more do they think they can build in this quaint town in Northern Vermont before it turns into something that, whatever it is, isn't the balance and quality of life that Stowe has right now?

Because once it is gone, it's gone. It's not coming back.

FLAGSTAFF: THE CITY OF SEVEN WONDERS

The reality of dramatic population growth fueling changes that threaten to forever vanish the beloved rustic traits and fresh-air-qualities of a mountain town loomed large as I made my way back to Flagstaff this summer. The once-quiet mountain town in Northern Arizona sits in the shadow of the towering Humphreys Peak, Fremont Peak, and Agassiz Peak — collectively known as the San Francisco Peaks — that rise to nearly 13,000 feet in the Colorado Plateau. It is gorgeous mountain country that fills the air with the perpetual scent of pine emanating from its forests. Flagstaff stands in stark contrast to the arid sweep of the Sonoran Desert to the south with its metropolitan sprawls of Phoenix and Tucson and the 6 million people who live there.

I know Flagstaff well, or at least what the mountain town had been, for nearly forty years.

As the 1960s came to a close, and just about the same time that John Denver was moving to Aspen, my parents, along with my aunt and uncle, decided to purchase a sizable multi-acre lot of land that was then well beyond the outskirts of town in an area known as Fort Valley. At the time, it was roughly eight miles from the municipal rim of civilization that was marked by the nearest gas station and a general store called Yellow Front.

Our property was on Roundtree Road, which wasn't much more than a cleared spur running off U.S. Route 180 that had been leveled and topped with rust-tinted volcanic cinder, known as scoria, produced during eruptions in the prehistoric era. The U.S. Postal Service designated it a Rural Route, a classification that meant the few residents actually living out there stacked all their mailboxes at the juncture of the road and highway. On our side of the road, there were a handful of custom mountain homes sitting on minimum lot sizes of 5-acres in heavily wooded areas that had been partially cleared, with most of them having been built in the 1960s, each owner putting in their own septic and water tank systems.

On the other side of Roundtree Road was the federally protected Coconino National Forest, an amazingly dense veil of woodland pines that could seem invitingly enchanted and broodingly ominous all at the same time. As a kid I learned to view the forest as something akin to the ocean, something that calls to you, but with the proviso to tread lightly, careful not to drift too far from its edge.

The surrounding area of Fort Valley at the juncture of the highway and our mountain 'road' was known locally as Baderville, much of it a pastureland with a few scattered ranches and a couple of homes but mostly populated with just the odd head of cattle, horses and some feed sheds that appeared to be holdovers from the 1800s that were slowly sinking into the earth. As a kid in the 1970s, I recall watching one feed shed in particular slowly disappear into the earth in seasonal increments until what was left of its roof protruded from the soil. It seemed like a long and poignant farewell and one that decades later I would look back upon as a metaphor for the vanishing of a simpler lifestyle that defined an era.

While my folks ultimately did not relocate our family; my aunt, uncle, and cousins did indeed settle into Flagstaff at the dawn of the 1970s and as a result I found myself in the midst of the woods and the town for regular stretches during each season of every year, well into the 1980s, and then continued hanging out in Flagstaff at various junctures throughout the 1990s before finally moving there in 2003.

The multidecade arc of my time in Flagstaff afforded me a vantage point from which to observe and assess the town's development — or blessed lack thereof — and its ability to preserve its unique alpine identity while making the most of the resources that it needed to survive and thrive as the national landscape around it experienced rapid population booms and the subsequent life-altering changes unfettered growth inevitably brings.

After taking a lease on a single-family home in the Cherry Hill neighborhood just above Flagstaff's historic downtown, I spent a year mostly just decompressing from my life as a newspaper reporter in Southern California on a sabbatical that was marked mostly by long walks with my dogs deep into the woods, followed by evenings spent enjoying local fare at one of the eclectic eateries or bars that had sprung up in the old downtown's historic buildings.

In the early aughts, Flagstaff had gently evolved, having shed much of its rough-and-tumble features of the 1970s, an era when some locals would occasionally seem to reenact saloon brawls from some of Hollywood's more vivid Wild West interpretations in its watering holes like Joe's Place on Route 66. By the 2000s, the epic bar Joe's Place had moved, and the town embraced a far more congenial and casually laidback college-town-vibe that attracted a steady inflow of new residents looking for some mountain air to go with either their fresh start, break away or retirement.

But along with gentrification, I could also see some clear warning signs of what was to come for Flagstaff.

Despite its proximity to the peaks and its once abundant snowpack, by the opening years of the 21st Century, Flagstaff was already facing water shortages and the year I became a full-time resident, the city council initiated mandatory water restrictions for all residents. Climate change has made its effects felt in Flagstaff, where annual average snowfall declined by nearly 23% between the 1970s and 2010s, from approximately 110 inches to 85 inches.²¹

Diminishing snowpacks can be immediately felt in the shortened ski seasons at Flagstaff's Snow Bowl ski resort, long a critical attraction for the hospitality sector as it draws seasonal visitors to the town and the resort can handle up to 4,000 daily skiers at peak season.²² While the watershed from the mountain snowpack is critical for recharging groundwater supplies, it typically accounts for about 5% of Flagstaff's water supply annually, but during the summer months that figure can rise to 20%, with reservoirs and aquifers making up the difference.²³

Flagstaff, at the turn of the 21st Century, also began to manifest some of the disruptive stressors on affordable housing stock that are now virtually universal throughout many mountain communities. As a middleclass professional, I had no trouble finding a single-family home to lease for myself at a reasonable price in Flagstaff nearly a quarter century ago, but I also met many young professionals who were faced with the tough choice of either becoming a roommate in a nice home in a safe neighborhood or renting their own place in a dodgier part of town.

When I left Flagstaff to accept a publisher's offer that would take me back to Los Angeles, I couldn't have imagined more than two decades would pass before I returned to the mountain town I knew and loved, and yet that is how my life unfolded. As I made the long drive back this summer, to show my wife the Flagstaff she had long heard about but never experienced, I wondered what I might find in the place I had known so well but hadn't seen since George W. Bush was still in his first term.

I found myself wincing as we got off Interstate 40 and made our way up to Route 66, the traditional main drag in town, particularly as we passed some of the multistory soulless big box buildings that have come to define multifamily housing in the 21st century. I realized that I didn't recognize much of the landscape at all. The Gables was gone. The famed restaurant that had catered to NASA's Apollo mission astronauts during the 1960s as they trained for their lunar landing

at Meteor Crater, had changed hands before it was finally bulldozed into a parking lot in 2023.

But one feature of old Flagstaff did remain plainly visible: the curve of Route 66 as it winds under the rail bridge, a structure that was built in 1934 as a project of FDR's massive New Deal rollout of jobs, still stands proudly. The traffic that was backing up underneath it by the 1980s has gone from a fleeting annoyance to a stroke-inducing absurdity in 2026 as an ever-increasing gridlock of vehicle traffic backs up from the hard left turn at North Humphries Street.

In short, while the town has essentially tripled in size since the 1970s, growing from 26,000 to more than 77,000 today, little to nothing has been done regarding traffic in the old downtown, where the heart of Flagstaff's civic identity actually beats. Jammed intersections, narrow mazes of one-way streets filled with oversized vehicles and rigorous parking limitations all combine in a perfect storm of what happens when growth outpaces sensible planning. It's only going to get worse.

In December 2025, the Flagstaff City Council approved streamlined zoning rules that would allow developers and builders to bypass the typical site plan reviews and permitting process that governs multifamily housing if they are constructing duplexes and fourplexes across the city.²⁴ Exempting duplexes and fourplexes — or what the city calls 'middle housing' — from more critical and deliberate processes that have helped Flagstaff maintain its character came as the council struggled with ever greater demand for affordable housing and more housing stock in general.

I couldn't help but think that as beautiful and wonderful as Flagstaff still is — and it is — the changes wrought by the mountain town's accelerating population growth remind me of civic scar tissue that is growing like a patchwork of skin grafts, something the state's legislative brain trust in the teeming capital of Phoenix have just decided its residents will just have to live with.

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOPS

All over the nation, mountain communities of every size are experiencing the same inexorable pressures resulting from population growth. The hard living conditions on the mountainsides no longer offer decisive deterrence against large-scale development and our civilization's accelerating abilities to more rapidly recover from blizzards, avalanches and wildfires has also created a broader path for more human encroachment.

America's gonzo journalist laureate, Hunter S. Thompson, sought and found a life in the Colorado mountains, where, in Woody Creek, he reveled in the freedom his ranch dubbed Owl Farm afforded him, from 1969, right up until he decided to call it a day in 2005, in a manner not unlike his literary hero Ernest Hemingway's self-inflicted finale in the mountain town of Ketchum, Idaho.

Of the mountains, Hemingway remarked that once he was in the thrall of a towering peak, he lost all sense of time, which he considered wonderful. Thompson is said to have added to that perspective, in his own unique voice, observing: "You won't find reasonable men on the tops of tall mountains."

I think Hemingway and Hunter got it right, in their own ways, about the mountains.

And perhaps it is those of us who are happy to lose all track of time when in the mountains and who don't have any further inclination to be 'reasonable' when it comes to relentless buildouts or saving what's left of the forested lands and the ageless peaks who will prevail against the gathering storm of unsustainable population growth.

As the great essayist Edward Abbey might have noted: We tried reasonable, look where that got us.

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