AMENITY MIGRATION AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE RURAL WEST

Danya Rumore, Ph.D.
Professor of Law and Planning, University of Utah
Director, Environmental Dispute Resolution (EDR) Program
Founder and Co-Director, Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) Initiative

What to expect

• A little bit about me and how I got involved in studying amenity migration
• Key findings from my past research on natural amenity communities in the west
• What those findings and my current work tell us about:
  – How amenity migration is changing - and is likely to change - communities and the landscape of the rural west
  – What we can do to help communities prepare for and respond to amenity migration and related challenges and opportunities
• The important role of planners and planning in helping address the “probletunity” of amenity migration
• The Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) Initiative and how you can help us help you

Be prepared to engage via surveys!
Submit your questions via the Q&A function
ENVIRONMENTAL DISPUTE RESOLUTION (EDR) PROGRAM

Promotes a culture of collaboration around complex environmental, natural resource, and public policy issues throughout the mountain west through:

• Teaching and training
• Coaching
• Public education
• Collaboration advising and assistance
• Research and thought leadership

https://sjquinney.utah.edu/stegner-center/edr/
Increasingly popular places to live and visit

Big city problems in small rural towns and regions...

and some unique challenges
Big city problems in small rural towns and regions...

and some unique challenges

- Affordability and availability of housing
- Traffic/congestion/parking
- Insufficient or overwhelmed infrastructure and public services
- Employee attraction/retention
- Environmental and natural amenity impacts
- Economic vulnerability and need for diversification
- Loss of community character
- Questions about the role of tourism and tourism marketing
- Reduced quality of visitor experience
- Climate change vulnerability/adaptation
- Unique social-cultural-political dynamics
- Challenging local-regional-state-federal relationships

Gateway and natural amenity region (GNAR)

A region that surrounds state or national parks, other major public lands, scenic rivers or lakes, or is otherwise rich in natural amenities
Park City, UT

Two National Parks
One Destination

MOAB
Where Adventure Begins
Aspen, CO

Jackson, WY
Question for the audience:

What GNAR community (or communities) do you live in, work in, or tend to spend time in?
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INCREASINGLY POPULAR PLACES TO LIVE AND VISIT...
BIG CITY PROBLEMS IN SMALL RURAL TOWNS AND REGIONS

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2018 Study: Planning and development challenges in western GNAR communities

• How pervasive are these issues across the western GNAR communities?

• How are GNAR communities experiencing and dealing with these issues?
2018 Study: Planning and development challenges in western GNAR communities

- Database of western GNAR communities
- Interviews with public officials in 25 western GNAR communities
- Survey of public officials across all western GNAR communities

What defines a GNAR community?

- Small town
  - 150-25,000 people
- Proximity to natural amenities
  - Within 10 miles of a national park, state park, national forest, lake, scenic river, etc.,
- Not in an urbanized area
  - Further than 15 miles from an urbanized area by road
GNAR community database

- 1,522 GNAR communities
  - 821 incorporated cities
  - 701 Census designated places
- 30.6% of Mountain West communities
- 61.1% of “small” Mountain West communities

Interviews with public officials in a range of GNAR communities

- 30 public officials (planners, town managers, mayors, etc.) in 25 GNAR communities
- Communities were selected to represent diversity of:
  - States
  - Populations
  - Levels of development
  - Amenity types
- 2 individuals representing regional organizations working with GNAR communities
Survey was sent out to 1,278 GNAR community public officials

- Completed by 333 public officials in 264 communities
  - Average population of represented communities was 4,895

As of 2018, these communities:

- Were growing (8.2% average growth rate between 2013-2018)
- Had an average per capita income of $27,206
  - Rural west average was $26,141
- Had an average rent of $880
  - Rural west average was $789
- Were seeing higher than the national average rates of housing unit and rental unit growth
- Were becoming more popular places to visit:
  - 82% of respondents said the number of tourists visiting their communities increased in the last 10 years
  - 42% said this increase was substantial

If you want all the details...
Important community characteristics (2018)

- Well maintained city infrastructure (i.e. roads, bridges, and utilities)
- Access to open space/public land
- Good urban design/community aesthetics
- Healthy wildlife habitat
- Open space preservation
- A diverse range of housing options
- A vibrant downtown or main street
- Quiet neighborhoods
- Access to open space/public land
- Housing affordability
- Liveable wages
- Maintain community character/identity
- Small town feel
- Well maintained city infrastructure (i.e. roads, bridges, and utilities)

Key community challenges (2018)

- Too much tourism
- Environmental degradation
- Parking related issues
- Traffic congestion
- Population growth
- Crowding over interest recreational areas
- Change in community character
- Climate related risks
- Income inequality
- Lack of resources and revenue
- Housing affordability
- Average wages relative to cost of living
- Non-at all problematic
- Slightly problematic
- Moderately problematic
- Very problematic
- Extremely problematic
Housing (2018)

- 83% of survey respondents said that housing affordability was moderately to extremely problematic for their community
  - 33% said it was extremely problematic
- 26 interviewees representing 24 of the 25 communities in our interviewee sample identified housing affordability as a key issue for their community
- 49% of survey respondents said their community was not doing enough to address housing affordability
- Only 8% said their community was definitely doing enough to address housing affordability

Growth, tourism, and development (2018)

Our findings suggest growth is as much a or more threat to community character and livability as increasing tourism.

However, tourism development still presents challenges.
- 16% of survey respondents said that too much tourism was moderately to extremely problematic for their communities
- 4% said it is extremely problematic
“[Tourism] is a love/hate relationship. Everyone realizes to some degree that we’re reliant on it, but that doesn’t stop people from hating tourists. We don’t really have the infrastructure in place to deal with high-demand weekends, so in those times it feels like we’re being bombarded.”

“I think [tourism] is the double-edged sword. We need the tourism dollars, but at the same time, during the peak days, we do get complaints about the tourists. There’s the frustration with tourists who are renting out single-family homes as though they were hotels. That’s a new trend. There’s the frustration that they’re loud, obnoxious. They do what they want and it’s impacting the neighbors and other residents.”

Based on our observation and qualitative data:

- Certain issues seem to come to the fore as GNAR communities develop
  - Communities often quickly go from not being concerned about short-term rentals to being quite concerned, sometimes due to acute shortages of long-term rental/housing stock
  - Communities often become eager for public transit solutions once they reach a certain point in development, in part due to the displacement of their workers
  - Tensions between residents and tourists seem to appear once tourism reaches a certain level – or if the community attracts certain kinds of tourists
  - Many of these communities experience tensions between “old timers” and “newcomers” as they grow

- Certain kinds of GNAR communities tend to have certain kinds of issues (and don’t have other issues)
  - Geographic constraints may exacerbate housing issues, but also tend to prevent concerns about sprawl
A lot of GNAR communities say they don’t want to be like:
• Vail, Aspen, or Breckenridge, CO
• Jackson, WY
• Moab, UT

Or to be:
• “A tourist trap”
• A big city
  – Many say they want to maintain their “small town-ness”

On the other hand, some are concerned about becoming:
• “An abandoned small town”

Common themes from interviews:
• Importance of proactive planning
• Importance of planning at a regional scale
• Challenges associated with local resistance to planning, local political tensions, and the difficulty of getting different regional entities working together
• Feeling overwhelmed and/or in need of additional resources and capacity
  – 40% of respondents said lack of resources or revenue is very or extremely problematic for their community
    • Another 30% said it is moderately problematic
    – “We don’t have the staff capacity to deal with major crises.”
“We’re in this big growth period, but we didn’t have design guidelines in place…. From a municipal standpoint, we need to get ahead of the curve so we can prepare for what’s coming, but we need the time and staff and resources in order to do that.”

“The way that the city is trying to be forward-thinking in planning isn’t really welcome. [County] residents and commissioners are significantly more conservative than city residents, not just in a partisan political sense but in their attitude toward any change at all.”

Enter COVID-tastrophe...
WHY AN IDAHO SKI DESTINATION HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST COVID-19 INFECTION RATES IN THE NATION

By Michael Ames
April 3, 2020

CAN TOURIST TOWNS LIKE MOAB SURVIVE THE CORONAVIRUS?

by Jan Dufré / April 27, 2020 / 4.2k / 18 comments

"I immediately started sobbing," says Ariel Addis, expressing how she was overcome with emotion when she got the news that the coronavirus pandemic was forcing her family business to close.
Robert Gehrke: Utah towns near national parks want tourists to visit, but hope they do so responsibly

(Woody National Park in this photo posted to the Zion National Park Facebook page on March 10, 2020. More tourism and visits are being asked by the park. Many have encouraged visitors to practice social distancing to reduce coronavirus infections.)

By Robert Gehrke • Updated 2 days ago

WORKLIFE

What is Worklife?   How We Work   How We Live   How We Think   Hello Hybrid   More

HOW WE LIVE

The 'Zoom towns' luring remote workers to rural enclaves

(Images credit: Shanelle Shelia)
“COVID-19 EXPEDITED AMENITY MIGRATION TO THE RURAL WEST BY 15 YEARS”
What we are seeing across the high-amenity West (2021)

Basically, what we saw in 2018 - at a much broader scale and on steroids

- Skyrocketing housing prices and total lack of workforce housing
  - Colliding pressure from Zoom Towners, second home-owners, short-term rentals, etc.
  - “It’s a crisis”
- Major issues with employee retention and related business closures
- Pressure on infrastructure and concern about infrastructure failure
  - Transportation systems
  - Fresh water and wastewater systems
  - Recreation infrastructure
- Major tensions between conservation and development
  - Build more housing? Or protect open spaces and recreation opportunities?
  - Worries about “urban sprawl” in rural areas
- Major tensions within communities

“Spillover effects” and impacts on:

- Nearby communities
  - Development of commuter-sheds
  - “Reverse commuting”
- Natural resources
  - Wildlife habitat and corridors
  - Dark sky
- Wildland-urban interface
  - Wildfire risk

And throw into the mix:

- Climate change concerns
- Risk of unsustainable development, especially amid demographic shifts
  - Risk of “zombie subdivisions”
- NIMBYism
What we are seeing across the high-amenity West (2021)

How do we protect quality of life and ruralness and still provide places for people to live?
- Sandpoint, ID

How do we keep this a “real town” that is walkable and bikeable while accommodating more people?
- Whitefish, MT

How do we keep our small, quaint, rural character?
How do we not become Aspen - a place where only rich people live?
- Moab, UT

Pressure and opportunities to:

• Diversify economies
• Diversify communities
• Capitalize on the various forms of capital moving into communities (social, economic, intellectual, etc.)
  – Tax structures really matter!!
• Think about and plan for sustainability and resilience
Question for the audience:
What are your reactions to these findings and observations (from 2018 and now)? Does this resonate for Idaho? How so or how not?

Where to from here?

My advice...

• Communities need to collaboratively figure out “what they want to be when they grow up”
  – What do people hold dear that they want to protect or enhance?
  – No growth (or "no change") isn’t a vision!
• Then they need to use every tool at their disposal to get there
  – Zoning, codes and ordinances, housing and transportation plans/strategies, taxing and other revenue generation systems, community engagement, community development, educational campaigns, policies and programs, etc.
  – State policies can be a huge help or a huge hindrance
  – How do you get remote workers to “plug into the community and not just the wifi”?
• As part of this, communities need to consider and plan for uncontrollable sources of uncertainty and change - e.g., climate change
  – Scenario planning
• We need to deal with wealth inequality in this country
Focus on:

Where to from here?

• Collaborating and planning across transportation, housing, and land use
  – Explore and consider tradeoffs of different strategies and approaches and be intentional about choices
• Collaborating and planning at a regional scale
• Helping communities and other involved entities understand what is at stake
• Providing resources, support, and technical assistance to help these “small towns with big city problems” deal with their challenges

Don’t:

• Think it could never happen to your community or region, especially if it is near high quality natural amenities
• Lose time fighting over whether to grow or not

My advice...

It’s not working!

Tell your friends.
The critical role of planner and planning

Planners and allied fields are:
- Going to be on the forefront of preparing for and responding to amenity migration and related pressures
- Well positioned to exercise leadership to help communities prepare for and respond to amenity migration and related pressures

Leadership:
The “practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive”

How can you mobilize people to prepare for and respond to amenity migration and the challenges and opportunities it presents?
Question for the audience:
What do you honestly think of this advice?
What is YOUR advice?

A hub connecting people and resources to help GNAR communities and the regions around them thrive and protect the things that make them special.
Research

- What are the challenges?
- What are the opportunities?
- What are communities doing to prepare and respond? And what help do they need?

Education

- Getting students out working in GNAR communities, doing research, and developing tools
- Training for public officials and community members in GNAR communities

Technical assistance

- On-the-ground planning, urban design, and collaboration assistance
- Online toolkit and related tool and resource development
- Connecting service providers and resources with communities
- Peer-to-peer learning forums

Help wanted! (2018)

**GNAR communities want assistance with their planning, development, and sustainability issues**

- Strong interest in:
  - Model ordinances
  - White papers on key topics
  - Case studies and lessons learned
  - Best practice guidelines for GNAR communities
  - Help with charrettes and design workshops
  - Models for regional collaboration
  - Information about different funding options
  - Forums (in person, webinars, etc.) for peer-to-peer learning and sharing innovative ideas

- 95% said an online toolkit to support planning in GNAR communities would be helpful
https://www.usu.edu/gnar/toolkit

GNAR Toolkit

The GNAR Online Community Toolkit is designed to be a resource for planners, public officials, community members, consultants, and all others who are working in communities with access to significant natural amenities and recreation opportunities. This toolkit provides resources, case studies, model ordinances, and other tools to help GNAR communities plan for and respond to the unique planning, transportation, economic, community development, and sustainability challenges and opportunities they face. The toolkit is a living resource; it will grow and adapt in order to provide the most useful and up-to-date information possible.

Have ideas for topics we should address, thoughts about tools we should link to or develop, or suggestions for how to improve the toolkit? Add them to our list! You can use the toolkit to share your case studies, resources, and lessons learned, just email them to g2_sodd@usu.edu

https://www.usu.edu/gnar/gnar_network

The GNAR Network

The GNAR Network provides a forum where representatives of gateway communities can meet, share ideas, and identify immediate and high-priority needs that would allow them to make more informed decisions as they respond to the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impact on the well-being of their residents and their local economies.

Join the GNAR Network Today!
Receive the latest research, resources, webinars, and networking opportunities with other GNAR Communities straight to your inbox.
https://www.usu.edu/gnar/amenitymigrationseries

https://www.usu.edu/gnar/gnarlyproblems

Vail InDEED: An Innovative Approach to Increase the Home Supply for Year Round Local Residents
June 15 - 2:00-3:30PM MDT

Many gateway communities have adopted similar housing policies and regulations to improve affordable housing access, whether they be inclusionary zoning, commercial linkage, or development impact fees, and yet, the one thing we all have in common is we all face housing
https://www.usu.edu/gnar/gnarly_blog/index

Check out The GNARly Blog

Building Smart and Connected GNARs with the GNAR Compass App

Gateway and Rural Amenity Regions (GNARs) across the American West have experienced unprecedented social and economic change as a result of the pandemic. What was once a steady stream of international tourists has now completely dried up.

Specialization in
SMALL & RESORT TOWN PLANNING

More info:  http://plan.cap.utah.edu/
Thanks to the National Institute for Transportation and Communities (NITC) for funding our 2018 study and upcoming spillover study!

Thanks to APA ID for cost match!

• **2021 survey of western GNAR communities**
  • How are they doing now?

• **Case studies of 6+ GNAR communities**
  • Tell their stories
  • Derive lessons learned from their challenges and interventions
  • Develop policy, planning, and other recommendations
    • From the local to the federal level
    • Draw attention to the challenges and needs of these places

• **Peer-to-peer learning opportunities**
How you can get involved

• Integrated housing, transportation, and land use “spillover” study
  – Provide cost-match/sponsorship: expand our database of case studies and related efforts
  – Help us identify good case study communities
  – Fill out our survey if it comes to you and/or forward on to relevant public officials in GNARs

• Join our GNAR Initiative email list

• Watch and/or share our past and future webinars
  – November peer-to-peer learning session on integrated housing, transportation, and land use challenges and strategies in GNARs - date TBD

• Write a blog sharing lessons learned, best practices, ideas, cautionary tales, etc.

• Help us build a toolkit page

• Mentor and work with students
  – Spring workshop class - looking for student mentors/projects!

• Sponsor the GNAR Initiative

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**Question for the audience:**

Any final thoughts, suggestions, or ideas?

Particularly regarding how we can help you (and the communities you serve) and/or how you can help us help you?