

from the 1993 Zephyr Archives

AN INTERVIEW WITH GRAND COUNTY COUNCILMAN BILL HEDDEN

In the early 1990s, Moab was on the cusp of massive change. Recently, county residents had not only thrown out the old politicians, but the very '3-person commission' system used by almost every county in Utah. Hedden and six others were elected Grand County's first 'councilpersons' under the new form of government.

Here is an interview with Hedden, from July 15, 1993. The interview was conducted by Ken Davey, then a reporter for almost all of Moab's print and electronic media. He is now Grand County's economic development coordinator. Hedden is now the Executive Director of the Grand Canyon Trust.

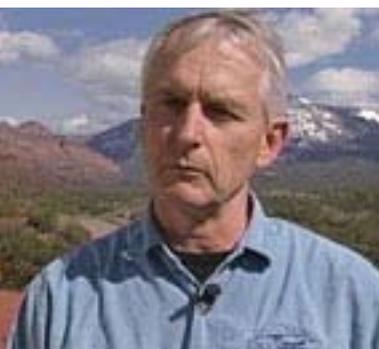
In this interview, Hedden warns Grand County citizens that "Old Moab" is about to vanish and that a "New Moab" is on the way. And that we better get used to it...turns out he was exactly right...JS

Zephyr: You were elected to the county council at a time of change. What are the things, in terms of planning and direction, that you feel have to be changed?

Bill: I think that in this instance, change is almost a reactionary thing. To say that for the first time in Grand County, we're not necessarily going to be boosters for every project that comes along, that we've had enough growth and enough development. We need to begin to be selective, or the shortage of housing and the rising prices are going to drive many of us out of here.

Zephyr: Looking to the future here, what do you see as the problems?

Bill: One problem that strikes me is that we're going to see the countryside around here get so much more intensively used that lots of us who have used this landscape for all sorts of reasons are going to find it harder to go out there and do the things we're used to doing. It doesn't matter if you're a recreationist, or someone who really likes to be alone, or graze cattle or mine...all those things are getting a lot more complicated. That's one big problem. We're trying to work with the BLM and the Park Service and the Forest Service to get everyone at least coordinated in their approach, to plan for the use of public lands in a cooperative way. We're going to take our best shot at that, but it's not a problem that can be solved.



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Zephyr: What do you mean by that?

Bill: The people who live here have been highgrading this part of the world. We've had some of the most spectacular country in the world, and no one else in it. The fact that those days are just about over is sad, but there are many more people in the world, and they have found this place, and there's no keeping them away. Just regulating the wild places and putting in porta potties and hardening campsites and paving trails may deal with the impacts, but it doesn't help someone who knew that canyon when it was wild and no one else was in it. That's what I mean by the problem being insoluble.

Zephyr: So are you a defeatist on that?

Bill: I think I would like us to work out as many parts of an answer here as we can, because we're facing it, along with Washington County, before the rest of Southern Utah. Answers that we work out here will be helpful to other places.

Another problem that I see is that Moab is going to become a much more expensive place to live. That scares me. We're appealing to much wealthier people, lots of new construction, building much more expensive homes. We have people here now who really place a premium on education, we're going to be building new schools, we're going to have to upgrade our infrastructure. Every one of those pressures is upward on the cost of living. This used to be a hard place to get rich, but it was a real good place to be poor. I see that changing, and I don't like that. That's one of the problems that's uppermost in all of the members of the council's minds.

Zephyr: Don't limitations, in terms of growth, housing, land available for building, don't they increase that pressure? The less land you have to build on, the more valuable the land becomes. Isn't that one of the problems of Aspen and Telluride, they have such limited land?

Bill: Well, yes, that's true, and you have to remember this is a desert oasis. Not too many people are clamoring to go live in Cisco. We have an oasis here, and another in Castle Valley. We do have limitations. But if you're trying to set me up for the next question about whether restrictive zoning and so on is going to accelerate the problems I'm describing, I will say that I know that, I've been aware ever since I first got involved in this political

thing. By doing things that seem very farsighted, preserving open space and helping the community in a "classy" way, I may well accomplish the exact opposite of what I would love to see happen in Moab, a beautiful, exclusive place that I can't afford to live in anymore. I'm aware of that contradiction, and I've been wrestling with that for five or ten years now. I have some little pieces of answers, but I'm not sure that I know. My crystal ball is murky.

Zephyr: Is the big problem growth in the towns or is the big problem out in the countryside?

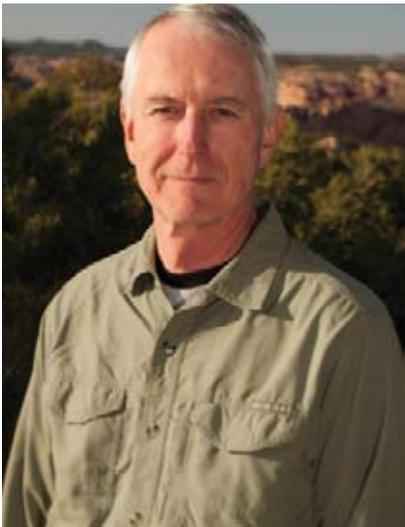
Bill: Something that Charlie Peterson (Grand County Council chairman) is always pointing out is that it would be best if we concentrated people in small lots, people who want to live on small pieces of ground, in the urban part of the county, and that we maybe would want to restrict how many small lot subdivisions could be built way out in Spanish Valley. The biggest problem would be to let a whole lot of subdivisions be built way out in Spanish Valley that have their little lots, and need to go a half mile to hook up to the sewer. Our infrastructure would be inadequate even more rapidly than it already is. I would tend to think the big problem is further out.

Zephyr: There is a hue and cry each spring that the visitors are destroying the area. You drive up the River Road and there is smoke in the canyon, campers everywhere. You go up Sandflats and you see people falling all over themselves. But are people overreacting to a small percentage of the land being over used and abused, and not taking into account that 20 miles outside of town in another direction, where you don't see too many people?

Bill: We're still very fortunate that there's so much great country around here, that anyone who lives here for awhile can discover places the tourists don't know about. But there's a new guidebook published every week it seems, and during the busy weekends this spring, there were 180 people camped per mile in some of the more remote sections of Canyonlands National Park. Their visitation is up 44 percent this year. That period when it seems like chaos and



a circus along the river and along Slickrock grows larger every year. And this spring it spilled over into what I call "total camping," cars next to one another and tents placed so close that there's nothing but smashed down territory. That spread into a number of new places where it hadn't been before. It's not alarmist to be pointing at this and saying it's a real problem. People at Canyonlands and Arches are practically in a desperation mode now to find answers to some of these things.



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Zephyr: People are going to say to you, "You came here, you were allowed to move in, and now you're trying to stop others." What's your response?

Bill: Well, if I actually had a plan that was going to stop anybody else, I'd feel that's a more appropriate criticism. But my general response to that is to liken a little community like this, that is, a desert oasis with a lot of uninhabitable ground around here, so we're all crowded together, and it's a nice place to live. We've got something very special here, and it's like a lifeboat. If you have a lifeboat you can say, "sure, you guys got in, how can we restrict the next person from getting in?" But when the person gets in who tips the boat over and every-

one drowns, then you've lost it all. So I don't think it's completely inappropriate at some point to say, if we don't start thinking about how many people can live becoming lives in this valley, then we'll make it into one more suburb of Salt Lake, where everyone who lives here will have a tremendously diminished quality of life.

Zephyr: Isn't there an element of elitism in that? Doesn't it mean that "me and my friends" have a right to enjoy the area, but other people are coming, we have to somehow prevent that?

Bill: In a community this size, that has a real personal flavor, the people who live here put a stamp on it...communities like that evolve. This place had probably a very distinct character in 1900. In the 1950s when it was booming with uranium, it was a totally different town. And every one of those groups probably felt like, "this is our town." That's part of the nature of a place like this. We (council members) were all called a bunch of outsiders who had no business getting involved in county government, even though some of us have been here quite awhile. Maybe we're guilty of the same thing, we say "we know Moab, we have a vision of what kind of place it ought to be, we're fighting for that." As long as that seems appropriate to the majority of people here, they'll support us. When they say, "you guys have lost touch with this place and what people really want," then we'll probably be out on our ears, and it will be a new town.

Zephyr: You've talked about the need for planning, you've talked about some of the problems. But what is your vision? What would you like to see the county look like in 10 years?

Bill: I generally look for balance. And I have to admit, I like a lot of the things that have come with all the new activity here. The new cultural activities in Moab, there are terrific new people here, I enjoy the bookstores and the restaurants, these things are exciting. It's fun to go into City Market and meet Europeans, try out my German once in a while. But I think we need to realize that lots of towns end up looking back and saying, "Gosh, you should have seen Santa Fe in the 1950s," or "you should have been in Aspen in the 1960s," and

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