

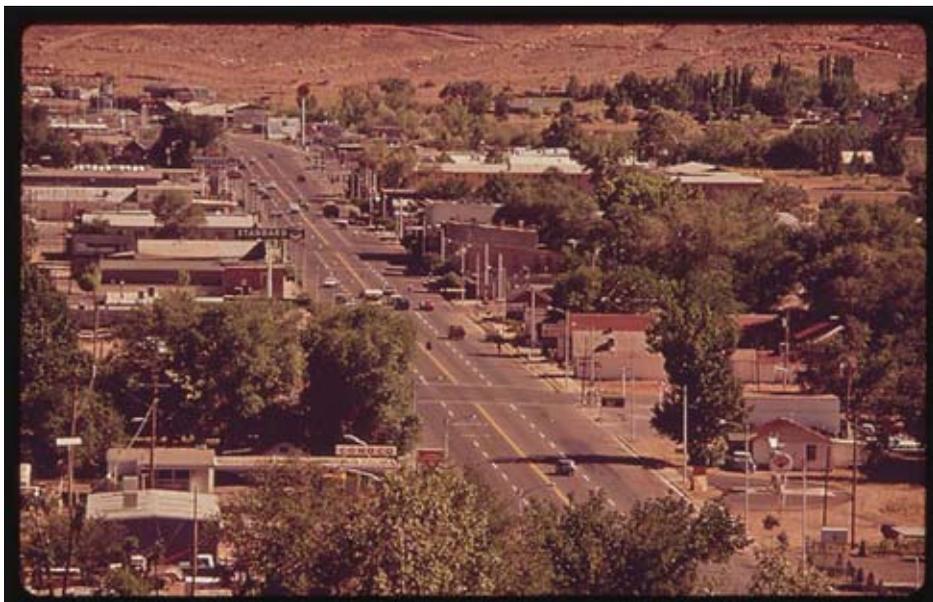
A few weeks ago I was surprised to find a message in my Facebook inbox from Jim Stiles asking me if I would be willing to contribute to the Zephyr. My initial reaction was to laugh. While I do not read it as often as I did 20 years ago when it was a paper I could stuff in my grocery bag, The Zephyr is a paper I have always enjoyed reading. The Zephyr was an essential monthly supply when I was a caretaker living 30 miles from town with no electricity or telephone – if the articles weren't interesting enough to read 5 times, the cartoon ads were always worth more than one close look. Me, write for The Zephyr, that was a laughable thought.

I asked my husband, Ray, what he thought about this. Ray's first reaction was "wow, you'd better have a pen name!!" That got me thinking, and then little nervous.

I now have lived in Moab longer than I have lived anywhere in my life. I call it home. I own a business here. I try to stay informed about the events and people in and out of town that impact us. But I don't get out much, so my world is largely influenced by growing plants, the river, hiking with my dog, conversations with friends, and reading news when I can stomach it.

My opinion doesn't matter more than anyone else's. I expect I will write things people I know and respect may disagree with, possibly strongly. Hopefully it will be different people each time. Hopefully I can write with clarity and not offend people who I know, have worked with, and certainly who I respect. I hope that by putting my opinions out there I will think and learn more as well.

One thing I have noticed in common with everyone who stays in Moab – native born or exotic transplant – we all love it here. For different reasons, sure, but we all love the red rocks, the river, the mountains, and the community.



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### **FINDING HOUSING IN MOAB – 1994 and 2014: IT GETS HARDER EVERY YEAR**

Have you looked for a place to live in Moab lately? I have been noticing lots of posts on social media looking for a place to rent. It seems rentals are in short supply. If you need rent under \$1000 it looks nearly impossible to find one.

This is not a new problem. Moab has never had a plethora of housing options. For various reasons there are few apartments here. Moab housing construction, as in many rural areas, exemplifies the "American Dream" of single family detached housing with space between houses.

Developments in Moab match national patterns and trends. In several courses in college we walked through neighborhoods in surrounding cities learning how the exterior layout of the homes and buildings told when the neighborhood was built; detached garages came in the 50s or were added on later, attached garages in the late 70s and 80s; house sizes in the 1930s were much smaller than in later decades; front porches came and went and are sort of back again. Back alleys at one time were the norm.

I moved to Moab in 1993. Few homes had garages, or if they had them they were add ons, usually car ports. It didn't dawn on me then, but it does now, that nearly no homes were built here in the 1970s and 80s. As I have grown to understand Moab's history this makes sense. No one had any money here to build anything at that time – people were

leaving, not moving here.

Moab has changed a lot since then.

When I first arrived here I often heard "we don't want be like Aspen". Well, Moab, we have become....a while ago, actually.

I spent a number of years on the Moab City Planning Commission, before Moab had a Burger King, or an Arby's or Taco Bell (which are now gone). I was appointed when City Hall was a small collection of offices around a few windowless rooms where the Council met. USU Moab now uses that space. Affordable housing was a hot topic then – and I remember talking at length about what we could do about it. In the end, a decision was made by not making one.

I don't remember many of the details of those conversations. What I do remember was the feeling of helplessness. The feeling that this problem is bigger than us. The

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feeling that nothing we could do would help.

And in a democratic capitalist society where the Market is considered the great leveler perhaps there really wasn't much we could do.

Housing is a tough issue for local government to influence – especially ensuring there is affordable housing. Many people see local government's role as providing for public safety and health. This usually is interpreted to mean infrastructure: things like roads and streets, water and sewer systems. Housing is perceived as the job of the private sector to provide and to build. In this view, government's only role in housing is providing necessary infrastructure, and drafting and adopting planning and zoning requirements to assure development of homes or commercial business do not impact the safety or well-being of citizens. I am not so sure that this is the whole role of local government.

### **IT ISN'T JUST MOAB.....**

A recent article in The Atlantic (Rural America's Silent Housing Crisis, Jan 28, 2015. Gillian B White) highlights that a lack of affordable housing is a nationwide problem that is particularly challenging in rural communities.

Only 1/5 of the population of the US population lives in rural areas, which means programs that assist with housing often skip over these areas since there is little political fat to gain. According to the article in The Atlantic "funds for rural housing provided by the USDA via the 502 Direct Loan program – one of the government-aid programs for purchasing or rehabilitating homes in rural areas...– have decreased over the past few years". From 2010 to 2013 funds allocated for the direct loan program have reduced by over half (and it was a tiny program to begin with). Keep in mind, this fund is a low interest loan fund. Loans are given to individuals and families who may not be able to get a traditional bank loan. This is not a handout – this is a hand up. This kind of hand up is vital in a community with minimal apartment and rental housing stock, and lots of low paying jobs. And this program is all but dead.

The Market has not taken care of it; not in Moab and apparently not anywhere else. According to the City of Moab Affordable Housing Plan, in 2000 the gap between units available at affordable rents and demand was about 50. Fifty units seemed doable to build; a couple of apartment complexes could eliminate that gap. Allowing mother-in-law units on large lots in certain zones could have helped. Increasing densities in residential zones that are close to downtown could have meant that small infill could have begun to meet that need. We talked about these things, but none of those things were done. At planning commission meetings, and subsequent city council meetings, any efforts to change densities were met with protests of "we'll lose our rural character". Well, it's ten years later and we lost it anyways. And I, for one, wish the loss had gone to houses for residents rather than only temporary housing for visitors.

In 2009 the gap between rentals needed and rentals on hand was projected to top 224 by 2012. I suspect it is even wider today. The Market is not taking care of the problem.

**IT ISN'T FOR LACK OF BUILDING....**

Ironically, over the last 15 years Moab has had a housing boom of sorts. I know, I made a living from designing and installing landscapes for some of them. Some of the



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intricate and larger landscape installations cost more than it would to purchase a modest house. Many of these homes, while they vary in size and location, have something in common. They are empty much of the year.

The Market builds this way because it makes money – and makes it relatively quickly with few strings attached. No tenants to deal with, no maintenance complaints, no damage to fix, no cleaning up after pets. With housing stock that was marginal in 1990 and most new construction being houses selling for \$300,000 or much more, not much is available for those who live here making under \$15 an hour. Even if Moab's economy diversifies to include higher paying job opportunities, the hospitality industry is here to stay. There will always be a high demand for workers in positions that are not high paying. And there are not enough teen agers in this town to fill all those positions.

In my opinion, part of local government's job is to ensure that we have affordable, moderate housing available in quantities that allow a workforce to live here. A workforce that, at least a portion of which, likely will be earning a modest wage. A clean healthy home (rented or owned, small or large) is a foundation for safe and healthy residents; residents who make up a safe and healthy community.

The Moab community has complied with a 1996 Utah State law mandating that we have an affordable housing plan "that addresses the current need for affordable housing,

as well as needs looking at least five years into the future". And it is a pretty good one. But a plan does not build affordable houses. A plan for affordable housing has action steps that encourage the Market to build housing that is affordable. Unfortunately we, as a community, have not taken action based on that plan.

Just because the Market thinks Moab needs more hotels doesn't mean that we do. And the City and County could, as suggested in the Affordable Housing Plan, modify rules so that there are incentives for building moderate housing so that those projects could actually cover costs and be sold or rented for lower prices. Perhaps this is socialism, but I consider it taking care of your neighbors and community. There are limited large parcels of land in town where town homes, co-housing or apartments could be built. Should all these parcels become hotels or could these places house workers who keep those hotels, and other businesses, in business? The City or County cannot mandate that apartments, townhomes, co-housing or some other affordable housing options are built. But they could take a look at modest density increases, at impact fees, and at other incentives that might help those who may have a parcel of land that they are thinking of developing decide to build modest, affordable units rather than nightly rentals.

**CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT RESIDENTIAL DILEMMA**

An example of this is the zone where I live. I tell this story because I know it to be true, not to bash the City or any individuals who work there. I tell this story because it



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illuminates some rules to consider changing. I do not know exactly how to change them for the better, to figure that out needs more conversation and creative thinking. But there definitely are things that can be done.

My house sits in the C-3, or central business district. It started as a one room home that was moved to this location in 1908 and was the home of Moab's first doctor. Eventually two more rooms were built – a bedroom and a kitchen of sorts. At one time, dur-

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**THE ZEPHYR BACKBONE---February/March 2015**

Garrett Wilson  
Sandy,  
UT



Doug & Mary Travers  
San Antonio, TX



Terry Weiner  
The California Desert



Scott Grunder  
Ludington, MI



ALSO JOINING  
THE BACKBONE..

Mike Wagner  
Louisville KY



MATT & DEEPA ROBERTS  
Austin TX



Jannik Schou  
Whitehorse Yukon

Scott Thompson  
Beckley WV