

# Book Review: We don't want to become another Aspen... — A REVIEW OF ASPEN AND THE AMERICAN DREAM BY JENNY STUBER —

[ BY GEORGE SIBLEY ]

"We don't want to become another Aspen" has been a mantra in mountain towns through the 50-some years I've been in the Upper Gunnison Valley. But most of the things that we didn't like about Aspen were happening here anyway – escalating rents for a diminishing number of rental places; a proliferation of ever-larger second, third, fourth or fifth homes for out-of-state part-timers absent most of the time; ever classier and more expensive restaurants and shops; a "lifestyle" ever more unaffordable for ski bums like I was when I came to Crested Butte in the mid-'60s.

Aspen gets singled out for unwanted attention because these problems hit there first – but Aspen has also been muddling toward solutions longer than anyone else. A new book, *Aspen and the American Dream*, subtitled "How One Town Manages Inequality in the Era of Supergentrification," is the story of one of Aspen's most valiant efforts to answer the fundamental question: "How is it possible for a town to exist where the median household income is \$XX thousand, but the median home price is \$X million?"

The author, Jenny Stuber, is a professor of sociology at the University of North Florida – not immediately a Colorado credential. But she has been coming to Aspen since she was five to spend time with her father, and once got a ride to Aspen in John Denver's private plane; the singer and her woodworker father became friends while the latter was making furniture for the former. So she knows intimately, even passionately, the kind of town the remaining Aspen "locals" want to sustain: a place where the lines between "friendship and economic interdependence" converge despite "stark differences of power and wealth," and a kind of "class egalitarianism" results.

The book is the product of a fortuitous coincidence: her sabbatical year in 2016-17, and an unprecedented and courageous decision by the Aspen City Council to declare a one-year moratorium on all new building while the

Council and its voting public tried to decide more clearly what the town needed to sustain that egalitarian "character" under a tsunami of big money, and how to revise the City's land use code to better address that need.

This created an unusually open, articulate and frank public discourse about "place-making" – the attempt to institutionalize with carrots and sticks the cultural and socioeconomic mores that inhabitants feel are vital to the place. A huge opportunity for a disciplined sociologist in a place she also happened to love and understand to some degree, and the result is a thorough study and an enjoyable read.

Aspen in 2016 already had a strong set of policies in place driven by the philosophy that "development must pay its own way" – and then some. Heavy impact fees are levied on all developers and builders, commercial or residential – \$250,000-500,000 for "trophy" residences, and \$2-5 million for commercial projects. Many communities have gone from giving tax incentives to builders to charging them impact fees, but no one pushes it as far as Aspen has: the Aspen City Council and Pitkin County Commissioners are truly testing how hard developers and wealthy out-of-state homeowners can be squeezed before they decide it just isn't worth it to invest in Aspen, and its natural beauty and cultural charm.

The impact fees, however, along with various taxes like their 1.5% real estate transfer tax, have created a stock of 3,000 affordable housing units in the upper Roaring Fork Valley – not enough by half, but still a huge investment in making it a place where locals can live relatively affordably alongside the excesses of American inequality.

Those fees were already in place, generating more affordable housing, when the City Council declared its moratorium in 2016; the focus at that point was concern about some large new commercial buildings downtown, built on lots previously occupied by small businesses patronized by locals, and the new buildings were renting at \$200 a square foot (due partially to the impact

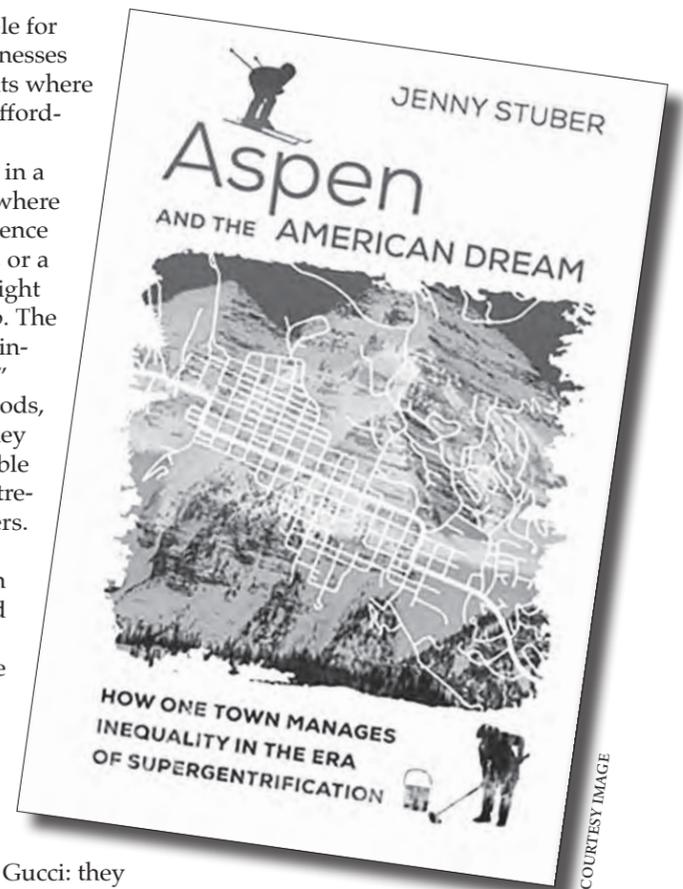
fees), rents only possible for high-end formula businesses like Gucci or restaurants where entrée prices were unaffordable for most locals.

This was resulting in a loss of smaller spaces where a drugstore or convenience grocery might survive, or a guy who likes bikes might start a bike repair shop. The impact fees were sustaining genuine "lights on" residential neighborhoods, but the locals feared they were losing an affordable downtown, both as entrepreneurs and consumers.

This led to a year-long public soul-search for how to identify and then institutionalize some protection for the character the people wanted for the town. The terms they articulated to describe the spirit of Aspen they want to institutionalize were definitely not Gucci: they want to sustain the "funkiness" and "messy vitality" of Aspen.

As the moratorium ran out, the Council finally adopted changes to the Land Use Code that it hopes will encourage a more balanced and diverse commercial mix that provides what visitors of all classes want, but also sustains essential businesses that meet basic community needs (groceries, drugstore, affordable clothing – and funky, messy vitality).

Will it all work? Or are they attempting what might prove to be, in the longer run, an impossible balance between the needs of an unmoneyed local populace hooked on their valley's natural beauty and cultural openness, and the needs of money to make more money? Stuber observes that the locals' lack of financial power is somewhat balanced by the fact that they elect the governing bodies, and most of the "supergentrifiers" cannot vote. As a result, "money talks" as always, but it doesn't



own the discourse, or the local institutions that come out of the discourse. And so far there has been no organized opposition from the wealthy against the obvious effort to make them pay for the sustainability of the local's place – probably because most of them, like the locals, treasure the natural power and beauty of the place too.

This review barely scratches the surface of Stuber's book-length report on her in-depth sociological work, but I think it is a book that all the community leaders who don't want their place to "become another Aspen" will want to read, to learn how Aspen has fought and finagled, with considerable creativity, to *not* be the Aspen it doesn't want to be either. It's not easy in a dollar-driven world, as either Ed Abbey or Hunter Thompson said, to find *and keep* a place where you can have a rich life without needing much money.

I got my copy at Townie Books.

## Legals

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### —AGENDA— TOWN OF CRESTED BUTTE REGULAR TOWN COUNCIL MEETING TOWN COUNCIL CHAMBERS 507 MAROON AVE; CRESTED BUTTE, CO MONDAY, AUGUST 15, 2022

#### Meeting Information to Connect Remotely:

https://us02web.zoom.  
us/j/81476047041

Or Telephone: Dial: US: +1 669 900 6833 or +1 253 215 8782 or +1 346 248 7799 or +1 669 444 9171 or +1 564 217 2000 or +1 646 931 3860 or +1 929 205 6099 or +1 301 715 8592 or +1 312 626 6799 or +1 386 347 5053  
Webinar ID: 814 7604 7041

Public comments may be submitted at any time to the entire Council via email at [towncouncil@crestedbutte-co.gov](mailto:towncouncil@crestedbutte-co.gov). The times are approximate. The meeting may move faster or slower than expected.

#### 6:00 WORK SESSION

1) Vacation Rental Regulations Update Kickoff.

Staff Contact: Community Development Director Troy Russ

6:25 2) Discussion with Town Attorney Regarding Working Relationship.

Staff Contact: Town Attorney Karl Hanlon

#### 7:00 REGULAR MEETING CALLED TO ORDER BY MAYOR OR MAYOR

#### PRO-TEM

#### 7:02 APPROVAL OF AGENDA

#### 7:04 CONSENT AGENDA

1) August 2, 2022 Regular Town Council Meeting Minutes.

Staff Contact: Town Clerk Lynelle Stanford

2) Bridges of the Butte Special Event Application and Special Event Liquor Permit for Sunday, September 11, 2022 Closing 3rd Street from Elk Avenue to the Alley Between Sopris and Elk Avenues, and the Southern Half of Elk Avenue from 3rd Street to 5th Street.

Staff Contact: Town Clerk Lynelle Stanford

3) Award of a Professional Services Agreement for Engineering Services During Construction of the Wastewater Treatment Plant Improvement Project to Carollo Engineering.

Staff Contact: Public Works Director Shea Earley

4) Authorization of the Town Council to Sign onto a Crested Butte News Letter to the Editor Regarding the Draft Community Compass.

Staff Contact: Community Development Director Troy Russ

The listing under Consent

Agenda is a group of items to be acted on with a single motion. The Consent Agenda is designed to expedite Council business. The Mayor will ask if any citizen or council member wishes to have any specific item discussed. You may request that an item be removed from Consent Agenda at that time, prior to the Council's vote. Items removed from the Consent Agenda will be considered under New Business.

#### 7:06 PUBLIC COMMENT

Citizens may make comments on item not scheduled on the agenda. Those commenting should state their name and physical address for the record. Comments may be limited to five minutes.

#### 7:12 STAFF UPDATES

#### 7:18 LEGAL MATTERS

#### 7:23 PUBLIC HEARINGS

1) (Second Reading) Ordinance No. 15, Series 2022 - An Ordinance of the Crested Butte Town Council Extending a Moratorium on Accepting Ap-

plications for Reviewing, Approving, or Issuing Permits for Certain Accessory Buildings for an Additional Six Months.

Staff Contact: Community Development Director Troy Russ

7:35 2) (Second Reading) Ordinance No. 16, Series 2022 - An Ordinance of the Crested Butte Town Council Approving the Lease of a Portion of the Property at 308 Third Street to the Crested Butte Fire Protection District.

Staff Contact: Finance Director Kathy Ridgeway

#### 7:40 NEW BUSINESS

1) Resolution No. 22, Series 2022 - A Resolution of the Crested Butte Town Council Authorizing the Town to Enter into a Broadband Facilities License Agreement with Visionary Communications, Inc. for the Installation, Operation and Maintenance of Broadband Facilities in Town Rights of Way.

Staff Contact: Public Works Director Shea Earley

7:55 2) (First Reading) Ordinance No. 17, Series 2022 - An Ordinance of the Crested Butte Town Council Amending

Chapter 16, Article 1 of the Town Code to Amend the Definition of Fabric Structure and Amending Chapter 16, Article 14, Section 180 of the Town Code to Amend the Town's Fabric Structure Allowances.

Staff Contact: Community Development Director Troy Russ

#### 8:10 COUNCIL REPORTS AND COMMITTEE UPDATES

#### 8:15 OTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THE COUNCIL

#### 8:20 DISCUSSION OF SCHEDULING FUTURE WORK SESSION TOPICS AND COUNCIL MEETING SCHEDULE

• Tuesday, September 6, 2022

- 6:00PM Work Session - 7:00PM Regular Council

• Monday, September 19, 2022

- 6:00PM Work Session - 7:00PM Regular Council

• Monday, October 3, 2022 - 6:00PM Work Session - 7:00PM Regular Council

#### 8:25 ADJOURNMENT

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