Water, housing and the opportunities ahead

Jeffrey Woodruff

Guest Commentary

At the Colorado River Basin Roundtable, our monthly reports from the water planning liaison showed the South and West of Colorado were consistently in extreme drought. As of this past month, Aspen is in an exceptional drought — the most severe classification possible.

For those who live here, we don't need data to tell us what we can clearly see and are experiencing firsthand. In December, we watched as half of our snowpack vanished due to high temperatures. Now in January, many skis and skins and helmets lay untouched as early-season conditions persist. Engineers work early morning shifts to convert potable water to winter wonderland.

Of course, water scarcity is not just a winter phenomenon. This summer, stories abounded about ditches shut off earlier than any period on record. Atop Cottonwood Pass, metal stakes depicted the receding water marks from the pond, offering less water for the migrating elk, heard bugling at the edge of the field. The water pressure barely met the needs of three first responders as my neighbor watched their house of nearly 50 years disappear in flames.

These stories of water scarcity span the seasons, but they barely scratch the surface of how this persistent drought is impacting our livelihoods, our residents and our communities. And humans are not the only ones affected. The lack of fresh water sources results in the loss of wildlife, the destruction of riparian corridors, the loss of recreational opportunities in the water basin, rising alkalinity of the water, rising water temperatures and decreasing pH levels, and higher metal concentrations leading to toxicity.

Systems, by their very nature, are connected. Of course, water is not the only system at play here. And if we want to protect our quality of life and what we cherish about these landscapes, we will need to explore another challenge we face — a place to call home.

Amid this persistent lack of water, there is another crisis our communities are facing — both in the Roaring Fork Valley and throughout the state — and that is housing affordability. We know the majority of workers in Pitkin County come from neighboring counties, and while home prices grew by nearly 200% over the past six years, wages have grown by only 78%. And once again, the data show what many of us already know — affordability is one of our most complex and tenacious challenges.

But we haven't, and we won't just sit around. Our housing authority already has over 3,200 units, and Pitkin County has been adding to its portfolio of rental units, employee deed-restricted units, and working with regional collaborators on even more deed-restricted units for our workforce. We were early contributors to the West Mountain Regional Housing Coalition and offered financial support to our municipal partners on their projects in schematic design through our employee housing exaction and property tax. Just as importantly, we partnered with our neighboring communities and individuals to protect nearly 140 mobile home park units, typically one of the naturally occurring forms of affordable housing.

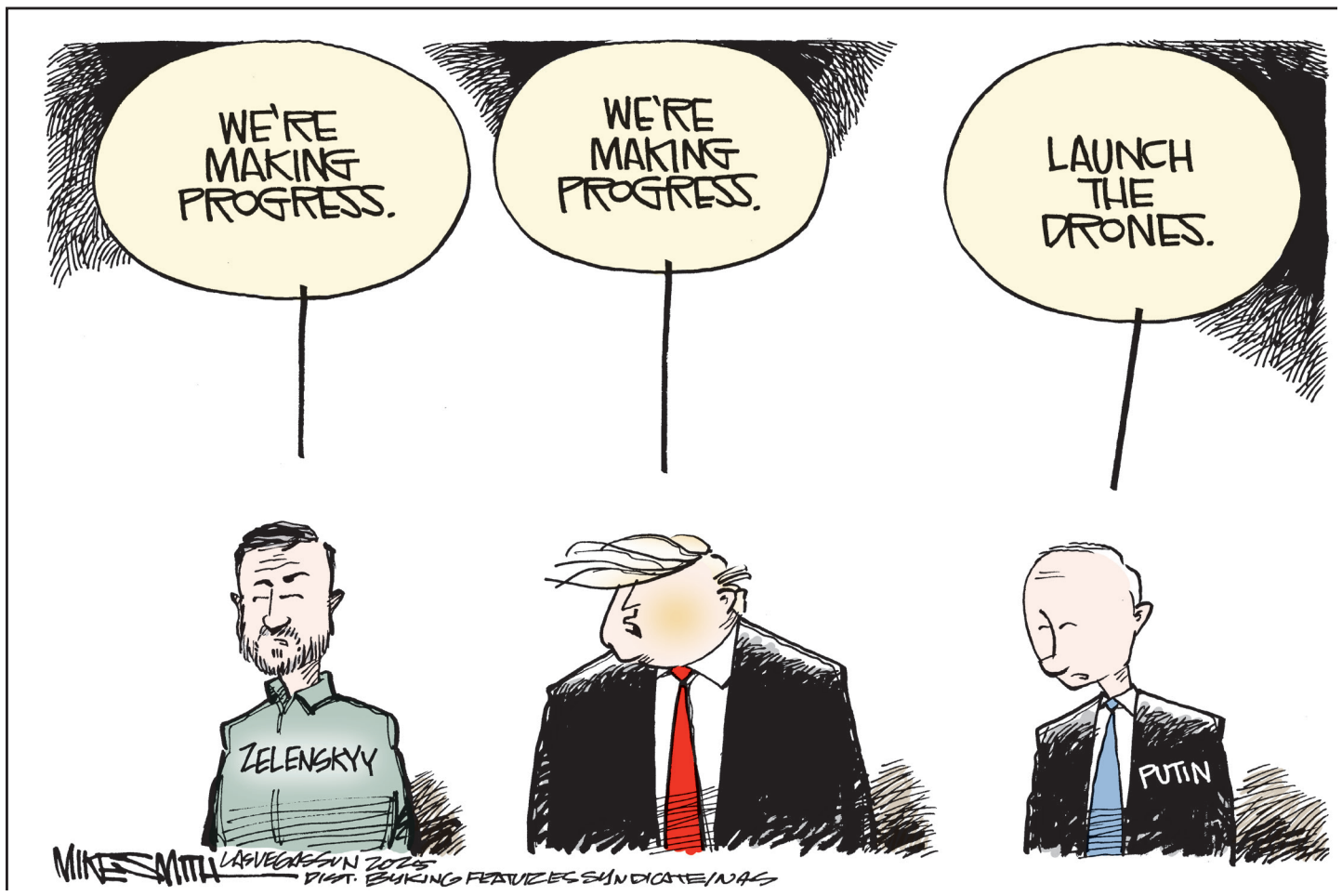
Even while we're making progress and demonstrating the power of working together, the state is taking a much different approach. It is demanding housing densities that do not match our rural landscapes. Densities that would exceed what we've established through thoughtful planning within our urban growth boundaries. Densities beyond our urban growth areas that would stretch already limited resources. Densities that would draw down our scarce water resources.

Perhaps if one isn't here in our communities, you may not see what happens when the land is too dry to farm, too dry to support domestic water use, too dry to protect the life and safety of a family. You could conceive of plans for more housing, growth and bed counts without accounting for water scarcity. Prioritize the inflow and outflow of people instead of the lower flows in our streams.Then maybe it is easier to view the water and housing crises separately.

But here in the headwaters of the Colorado River, we know we cannot afford that approach. Our communities are not an exurb or subtopia on a slide deck. Together, we are sitting on our decks savoring the sound of the Fork. As the river rolls down the valley, we roll up our sleeves to craft strategies and act as one to better our communities — both for people and nature.

Clearly, we want and need solutions. We are already demonstrating progress locally and regionally. We encourage the state to join us. Come walk with us on the drought-hardened grasses in the summer or on our trails today that are either dry or muddy when we should be snowshoeing. Let's ring in the New Year and this next legislative session with an approach that respects the limits of nature and the persistent truth that our greatest challenges are best approached together.

Jeffrey Woodruff is a Pitkin County Commissioner.



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