

Jonathan Schechter "Corpus Callosum" Column  
*Jackson Hole News&Guide* – February 13, 2008

The Bridger-Teton National Forest lies within the USDA Forest Service's Intermountain region. By "late winter," Harv Forsgren, the Intermountain Regional Forester, will decide whether to sell all or part of the current Bridger-Teton headquarters property on North Cache; he will also decide whether to move the forest supervisor's office from that location. At a February 7 public hearing on the subject, Forest Service officials announced they were accepting written comments on the issue until February 14. This week's column is a copy of a letter I wrote to Mr. Forsgren about the subject.

Dear Mr. Forsgren,

I strongly urge you to keep the Bridger-Teton Forest supervisor's office where it currently is, and not sell any of the land upon which the office currently sits.

Both possibilities strike me as efforts to treat symptoms rather than the underlying disease. As a result, in my view, either action will cause long-term harm to the Bridger-Teton (B-T), harm which would far out-weigh any short-term benefits. This, to me, would be contrary to the Forest Service's fundamental mission of stewardship.

Below, I expand on my thinking. First, however, let me share my understanding of the situation.

As I see it, the root cause of this entire kerfuffle is that the Forest Service is, in essence, slowly going broke. In constant dollars, today's Forest Service budget is 7 percent lower than it was in 1991. Worse still is how those funds are allocated: in 1991, the Forest Service spent slightly over \$2 billion administering its properties; this year it will spend roughly \$1.2 billion, a 40 percent cut. (Graph 1) As a result, every aspect of forest management (except fire fighting) is under severe strain.

Two other factors seem relevant. One is that the current Bridger-Teton (B-T) headquarters building is old, and inefficient. The other is that, in 2005, Congress passed legislation authorizing the Forest Service to sell administrative land to raise needed capital. As a result, your office has unilaterally decided that, in the foreseeable future, the most expeditious – if not only – way for you to get the money needed to build a new headquarters building is to sell some or all of the prime real estate the B-T headquarters sits upon. According to the legislation, you have until September 2008 to initiate this process, although the conveyance (i.e. sale) does not have to be completed by then.

As a result of this time pressure, in February 2007 your staff started examining the sale of some or all of the Bridger-Teton headquarters property. Despite Forest Service protestations to the contrary, this has been anything but a public process: Six months elapsed between the time you started looking into the sale and the time you first notified the public what you were contemplating; another six months elapsed before last week's first – and only scheduled – public hearing.

More disturbing is the decision timeline presented at the hearing. According to your representative, you will make your decisions about the sale and headquarter re-location by "late winter." While no one defined "late winter," late April seems more-than-generous. This suggests you plan to make your decision within two months, meaning your only public hearing was held 12 months into a 14 month process. Not only does such a timeline suggest no real desire for meaningful public input, it makes it essentially impossible for the public to make any sort of positive contribution to the decision-making process. Instead, all we can do is protest – here's mine.

I see this whole issue as an act of desperation, one driven by a mandate enacted by a Congress and Administration fundamentally hostile to government in general, and land use agencies in particular. This is reflective of a more fundamental and systemic problem, the long-term mismatch between the resources the Forest

Service needs to do its job and what it receives from Washington. Taking the long-term view, that the Forest Service is even contemplating selling prime real estate suggests a history of fundamentally flawed governance and management. Not unlike a once-wealthy family living beyond its means, the Forest Service has been reduced to selling its assets in order to keep up its lifestyle; in anthropological terms, it's the equivalent of an agrarian community eating its seed corn. And just as with that seed corn analogy, once you sell the Cache St. property, it will be gone for good. Yet the fundamental problems will remain.

Systemic problems are not solved by taking short-term, desperate measures. Yet that seems to be exactly what is happening here. In last Thursday's public hearing, one Forest Service official said that, should the headquarters building not be replaced, within 10-20 years you would have some serious problems. Yet rather than take that 10-20 years to thoughtfully solve this problem, you're trying to rush something through in barely a year. Unfortunately, rushed decisions are often rash decisions.

Which raises a critical question: Over the next few years, what's the worst thing that will happen if you don't proceed with selling the land and/or moving the headquarters? This was one of many unanswered questions I posed at the hearing; it deserves an answer.

From what I can tell, the honest answer is "nothing too bad." As a result, rather than selling, I would urge you to formally approach the Jackson Hole community and ask for their help in jointly addressing some of the systemic, long-term problems facing the B-T. Because Jackson Hole is the area that will be most harmed by a decision to sell the property and/or move the supervisor's office, we should be quite motivated to work with you. Yet there has been no effort on your part to reach out to us. This, to me, is inexplicable.

What are the B-T's systemic, long-term problems? From what I can tell, there are three: the need for a new headquarters building; the need to house your employees; and a lack of money within the Forest Service budget to do either properly. Precedent suggests Jackson Hole can help you with all three.

While I appreciate that housing is a problem for the B-T, you severely hurt your credibility by raising the issue as you did: It can only backfire on you when your own data on housing costs don't back up your argument. Since that was the case, it suggests you are willing to say anything to justify a pre-ordained decision. Sadly, such "Boy Who Cried Wolf" techniques have been used by federal officials so often in recent years that claims about this not being a done deal are falling on skeptical ears.

To me, the critical housing question is whether a Forest Service employee, on a Forest Service salary, can afford a house anywhere in the Bridger-Teton area. When I raised this question at the hearing, the answer was that a yet-to-be-completed study suggests it's unlikely. Taking the long-term, systemic view, a related question is whether future Forest Service salaries it will ever make it possible for employees to afford local housing. That, too, seems unlikely.

As a result, it seems to me there is only one long-term answer to your housing issue: for you to partner with community housing agencies, whether to build homes on Forest Service land or to secure homes in affordable projects. Because Jackson Hole is the only Bridger-Teton community with affordable housing programs, it is the only community that offers you the chance to address your housing issues over the long-run. Yet you seem hell-bent to move from here, the one place that can help you. Why?

Regarding paying for a new headquarters building, after the public hearing, I heard an attendee ask one of your representatives whether you would be contemplating the sale and/or move if you suddenly were given the money to build a new building. "No" was the emphatic answer. This suggests to me another opportunity for partnering. When Grand Teton National Park needed a new visitor's center, it worked with the Jackson Hole community to fund an extraordinary facility. With a precedent like that, why exclude the public the way you have? Why exclude thinking about alternatives to selling your precious land? A congressional mandate? These come,

these go; aren't patience and prudence the keys to good stewardship?

Alternatives to selling the land may be possible, but the ham-fisted approach you've taken of putting out incomplete information and not pulling in the public from day one suggests you aren't interested in contemplating alternatives. Such an approach is not just wrong; it's very, very sad. Who knows what might happen if you approach the Jackson Hole community – our local governments, non-profits, and businesses – and say “We've been dealt a crummy hand by Washington. Will you please help us solve our long-term housing and facility needs?”

The positive side of the hornet's nest this issue has stirred up is that it shows how much Jackson Hole cares about the B-T, and how integral it is to the health of the community: economic, environmental, and otherwise. In fact, I would argue that the B-T is the most unifying force in all of Jackson Hole. From the rightest-wing sled-head to the leftest-wing tree-hugger, from hard-core recreationalists to infrequent bird-watchers, the B-T directly affects everyone who lives in or visits Jackson Hole. Had you been at the public hearing, you would have heard passionate and eloquent testimony from local, state, and federal officials, all explaining how important it is to the health of the Jackson Hole community and ecosystem that you keep the supervisor's office where it is. These folks, and many, many others, will help you find a long-term solution to your problems. But first you need to demonstrate your willingness to work with them.

In closing, perhaps the most poignant moment of the public hearing was something that wasn't said. During his presentation about this process, one of your colleagues displayed the criteria your office is using to evaluate this decision, a list that included things like maintenance costs, housing, administrative efficiencies, and other accounting-driven metrics.

Conspicuously absent from that list was any mention of the health of the land. Everything listed as important to you was administrative and economic; no mention was made of what was best for the forest. This strikes me as perverse at best.

I read the following on the Forest Service's website: “Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service, summed up the mission of the Forest Service— ‘to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run.’” Taking that long run view, it escapes me how selling the B-T land or moving its headquarters can help accomplish the Forest Service's mission; by working with the Jackson Hole community to keep the headquarters here, there's a good chance you can.

