

Jonathan Column – 16 July 08
(1,871 words; 1 graph)

Today's column is observations on four items in the recent local news.

Item 1: "Yellowstone visitation and gas prices both reach record highs in June; officials baffled."

Here are two truisms about humans in general, and Americans in particular: we take for granted that which is given to us; and we're self-absorbed. Combined, these truisms lie at the heart of the "Yellowstone visitation mystery."

As I've written about before, there is very little correlation between gas prices and local national park visitation. As a result, when looking to explain any park visitation figures, we need to look elsewhere. The question is: "Where?"

A clue lies in park visitation trends. For the last two decades, overall national park visitation has been in decline. Yellowstone and Grand Teton are no exception: between 1993 (the year Yellowstone and Grand Teton adopted their current visitor counting methodologies) and 2004, combined visitation to the two parks declined nearly 7 percent. It inched up slightly in the next two years, and last year rose over 8 percent. With this rise, the two parks finally returned to 1993 levels.

This leads into our first truism. Between 1993 and 2004, Yellowstone and Grand Teton visitation dropped 8 percent, while America's population grew 11 percent. Dividing park visitation into US population, in 1993, Yellowstone and Grand Teton visitation represented 2.2 percent of all Americans; 11 years later, it was 1.8 percent. Why? The simplest explanation is that, in increasing numbers, Americans simply don't appreciate the wonderful gift that is our national parks.

If this is true, why has local park visitation risen during the past few years? The answer lies in the second truism: Our absorption with \$4.00 gas is blinding us to a concomitant reality, namely the plummeting dollar. Because the dollar is so weak, visiting America is, increasingly, a screaming deal for foreigners. And when foreigners come to the U.S., they want to see that which Americans couldn't care less about: our national parks.

This explanation emerges from comparing Yellowstone and Grand Teton visitation to the value of the Euro over the last few years. Park visitation reached its nadir in 2004, when the Euro was worth \$1.24. Three years later, the Euro had increased in value 10 percent; so had Yellowstone's visitation (Grand Teton's increased 9 percent). Combine the data and, since 2004, there's been an almost perfect correlation between the value of the Euro and park visitation. (Graph 1)

Unfortunately, the park service doesn't track visitor nationality, so my "foreigner visitors" hypothesis can't be confirmed. However, supporting evidence comes from how people have been traveling to Yellowstone (Grand Teton doesn't track visitor transportation modes as comprehensively). Between 2004 and 2007, the fastest growing mode of visitor transportation into Yellowstone was bus, the choice of many foreign tours. More notably, last month Yellowstone saw an almost equal increase in those visiting via bus as in those arriving by car, a singular event in recent history.

Correlation isn't causation, of course, and from a statistical analysis perspective, I have too few numbers to be able to make any absolute claims. However, the coincidence between Euro value and park visitation is certainly intriguing, and suggests that the local tourism industry might be well-served by marketing internationally. This is especially true given the long-term prospects for the dollar: The Bush administration's and Congress's execrable fiscal management over the last seven years should mean a weak dollar for a long time to come.

Item 2: “Teton Valley hospital in dire financial straits”

The Teton Valley Hospital in Driggs is run by Teton Valley Health Care (TVHC). On June 26, TVHC’s CEO issued a press release about the hospital’s financial situation. The last paragraph reads: “TVHC is in financial trouble and needs assistance from the public and private sector. TVHC can’t continue operating as it has in past years. If immediate action is not taken to address the financial needs of this community hospital, it could face foreclosure soon.”

As I see it, the Teton Valley Hospital’s problems are the first in a series of woes that will soon befall Teton County, Idaho, something I’ll detail in a future column. Today, my focus is on a simple and straight-forward solution to the Teton Valley Hospital’s financial dilemma: it should be purchased by St. John’s Medical Center.

Two basic thoughts underlie this suggestion. First, the two Teton counties are essentially one large community divided by political and geographic boundaries. The more we can do to stitch the two counties together, the better off both will be.

Second, size matters in health care, because larger organizations enjoy efficiencies unavailable to smaller ones. If St. John’s were to acquire the Teton Valley Hospital, both would benefit by serving a larger population base, especially because the combined institutions could offer more and better services than either can alone.

Both Teton counties need strong hospitals, ideally locally-owned and -operated. If the Teton Valley Hospital can’t make it on its own, joining forces with St. John’s is the best solution for our larger “Greater Teton” community.

Item 3: “St. John’s Medical Center board rejects private non-profit concept”

The proposal to make St. John’s a private non-profit was motivated by a fundamental fact: there are serious problems with the current St. John’s governance system.

These problems have little to do with board members. Instead, they are a consequence of the underlying governance system, a reality confirmed by hospital’s due diligence efforts as it explored becoming a private non-profit.

This reality raises an obvious question for St. John’s: Now what? The board rejected one proposed solution, but the problem remains. As a result, the board must now figure out how to address the hospital’s governance shortcomings within the current governance system.

As readers know, I am obsessed with the concept of a “Statement of Ideal.” Not surprisingly, my suggestion to the St. John’s board is to adopt the following Statement of Ideal:

At St. John’s Medical Center, every patient, every time, will get exactly the care they need, at exactly the right time, with no waste, with an immediate response to problems and changes, in an atmosphere of complete physical, emotional, and professional safety for all involved: patients, providers, employees, and families.

By embracing this statement of ideal, the board would be setting a very clear, very understandable, very measurable institutional direction; not just for the board, but for employees, practitioners, patients, and the community as a whole. In so doing, it would also set a crystalline standard against which everyone involved with St. John’s could judge everything they do: Will this action move us closer to ideal? If so, do it (and aim to do it better next time). If not, then there’s something to improve. Adopting this approach would also give the community a clear way to judge the performance of the elected governing board, a standard lacking in elections for most other offices.

Finally, and most critically, adopting this statement of ideal would address one of the fundamental problems facing St. John's: the inability to set a long-term strategic direction.

Because half the board is up for election every two years, it is very difficult for St. John's to make any long-term plans. As a result, every couple of years, the hospital is prone to lurching off in a different direction. This makes it very hard for the hospital to make meaningful long-term progress, particularly in such core areas as finances and patient care.

In contrast, by adopting a patient-focused Statement of Ideal, the board would lock in a strategic course that would be very hard for future boards to change. Why? Because how can someone object to the statement? "Excuse me, Mr. Candidate, do I understand correctly that you oppose patients getting exactly the care they need when they need it? Or is it that you're for waste? Or against safety? Please help me understand your position." That would never happen. As a result, despite board turnover, the hospital would always stay focused on the same core ideal, a reality which would shape everything it does going forward. That alone would be a huge step forward for St. John's.

Item 4: "Town and County release draft 'Themes and Policies' comp plan document"

The comprehensive land use plan is this community's most important public statement of who we are; an expression of our fundamental principles, hopes and vision. In that way, it is analogous to the US Constitution.

Last month, officials released the latest draft of the "Themes and Policies" document that undergirds the plan. That draft, which is still missing some key components, checks in at 78 pages and around 28,000 words; when finalized, it will likely come in at well over 100 pages and 32,000 words.

In contrast, the US Constitution – amendments and all – is fewer than 8,000 words. Strip out those parts which are no longer valid (e.g. slaves count as three-fifths of a person; prohibition; and the like), and it comes in right around 7,000.

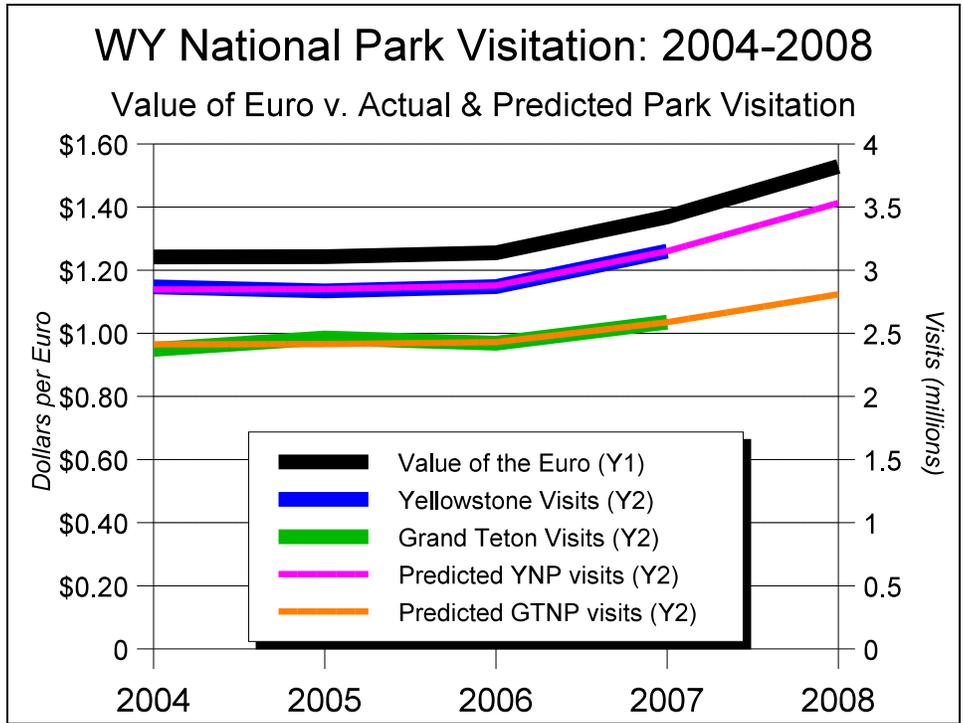
One quality that defines our "community character" is residents' passion for Jackson Hole. While this passion contributes to Jackson Hole's vibrancy, it can also lead to tremendous acrimony, especially in public debate over issues – like land use – that matter deeply to people. As a result, recent public meetings on the comp plan have been marked by acrimony, fear, and dis-trust, the very same qualities which dealt serious blows to the comp plan process of the early 1990s. Unfortunately, those blows continue to reverberate today.

My sense is that the length and complexity of the "Themes and Policies" document is one of the factors currently fanning that acrimony. It's asking a great deal of anyone to read the document in its entirety, for a literary masterpiece it ain't. Further, it's asking even more of people to read and react to something that is not just unfinished, but confusing, sometimes contradictory, and certain to change.

So what to do? My suggestion would be to use the Constitution as our standard, and reduce the next "Themes and Policies" draft to no more than 7,000 words (ideally far fewer). Why? Because if it works for the nation, it can work for our community.

Hacking 80 percent out of "Themes and Policies" will almost surely require a fundamental re-think of how we go about planning. In particular, it would force us to focus on a few core goals, something the current document – with its 7 themes and 48 principles – clearly does not do. Further, while such a re-think would be very hard work, producing such a simplified document would be a good thing at a number of levels (e.g. simplifying and clarifying will help ease the tensions, concerns, and suspicions which, if left unchecked, will only escalate over the next several months).

Going forward, my hope is that all future drafts of the comp plan will be hallmarked by simplicity, clarity, and brevity: no more than a few thousand words describing a few simple concepts in clear, direct language. Let the specifics be worked out in the subsequent land use regulations; for now, let's focus on getting the foundation clean, simple, and right. If we don't, I fear the current process may come back to haunt us, just as the previous one has.



Graph 1