

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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“We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.”

– two variations on the same quote, both attributed to Albert Einstein

So here's my theory.

The key to understanding Jackson Hole is recognizing it's a place of extremes: temperature and topography; beauty and wealth; elation and depression. Very little about this place is moderate, including the reactions it evokes: many love it; some hate it; few are indifferent. And as anyone who's spent any time here knows, it's shockingly easy to go from loving Jackson Hole to hating it and back again, sometimes in short order.

In short, Jackson Hole is a very hormonal, very adolescent place.

Just like in high school, everything that happens here not only gets noticed, but is fair game for comment. More importantly, most everything that happens triggers some sort of hormonal response: sometimes joy; sometimes rage; rarely a simple “So what?”

Why is this? Two reasons: passion, and simple economics.

Passion. Few people live in Jackson Hole because they have to. Instead, most of us are here because we want to be: Out of all the places in the world, Jackson Hole is where we've chosen to make our stand. By extension, most of us have made sacrifices to be here, leaving behind family and friends and greater career opportunities to live in a place that speaks to our souls. As a result, we don't take Jackson Hole for granted, and react to every little thing about our community the way a new mother reacts to every little thing about her child.

Simple economics. Increasing numbers of people want the decreasing amount of private land available in Jackson Hole. The result? Prices go up. As they do, the stakes and egos get ever-higher, and losing – or even compromise – becomes increasingly unacceptable.

Combine the two – passion and economics – and you get our current political and social climate. We all share a passion for Jackson Hole, but each of us holds a unique vision of what the place is and should be. When those visions collide – as they inevitably must – the result is not just disagreement, but a full-throated, mother-griz-and-her-cub hormonal battle royale.

In such an environment, how can we avoid gridlock, flaring tempers, and the like in our public debates? By making sure our policies reflect basic parenting techniques: grounded in clarity; and communicated in a short, simple, direct, and unambiguous fashion.

A great example of this concept is the checklist a college friend of mine used whenever he was feeling out of sorts: “When was the last time I ate? Slept? Exercised? Went on a date?” Unless he was sick, invariably the problem lay with one of these four. Short, simple, direct, unambiguous.

Why mention this? Because public debate in Jackson Hole needs such checklists; in particular because it feels as though the current comp plan revision is devolving into a classic teen-parent confrontation, with the teen (in this case, the community) saying “You aren't listening to me” and the parent (in this case, planning officialdom) saying “You don't appreciate what I'm doing for you.” Two parties; each certain of its views; each completely talking past one another.

The catalyst for all this is the current draft of “Themes and Policies,” the purpose of which is to identify the plan’s key principles and elements. As I’ve written about before, the document is long, complicated, and internally-contradictory; worse, neither the document nor process is done yet, nor is it clear when they will be. This type of uncertainty makes teenagers freak; why be surprised when the community does the same?

Planning and land use issues are complicated and nuanced, a reality reflected in both the current plan and “Themes and Policies.” Try to be complex and nuanced with teens, though, and you’ve set yourself up for failure. Ditto local politics, which are nothing if not hormonal and adolescent. Therefore, if planners want to minimize the battles around the revision process and future land use decisions, they need to start by accommodating reality: The revised plan needs to be short, simple, direct, and unambiguous, the essence of clarity. This is something the current draft most decidedly is not.

Before proceeding, three caveats. First, a strong case can be built that, on the whole, Teton County has done a pretty good job with planning and development. Yes we have challenges, but we also have a relatively healthy environment, a robust economy, and a deep and impassioned sense of community. Second, due to Wyoming’s laws, property rights are paramount and local government is exceptionally dependent on sales tax dollars. As a result, it’s always easier to approve a development than turn it down, a reality no land use plan will ever change. Third, I’m not a planner, so most of what I say here might be pooh-poohed by those who work in the field.

All this noted, if things were working well on the land use and planning front, we wouldn’t be having huge battles over proposed developments, and we certainly wouldn’t be revising our comp plan. However, we do and we are. So, following Einstein’s lead, may I humbly suggest we think about the process and plan in a very different way?

What might this be? I’ve talked about pieces of it in previous columns, advocating a much shorter “Themes and Policies” document, and making the core of that document a Statement of Ideal. (By the way, my friend’s “Sleep, food, exercise, dating” checklist is a perfect example of a Statement of Ideal: short, simple, direct, unambiguous.) Today I’ll throw in one final quality: prioritizing.

Simply put, there are only a few things you can do with a piece of land: conserve it, put housing on it (whether free-market or deed-restricted), or use it for commerce (ranging from agriculture to commercial). To date, the community has voiced its strong desire to sustain our wildlife and environmental quality, so let’s make this the plan’s paramount priority (in contrast to its current one-among-many-equals status). This step alone will eliminate a lot of the “you’re not listening” complaints.

What’s next? My sense is that planners should make “community character” the plan’s second priority, which means emphasizing workforce housing.

For two reasons, workforce housing is a much harder to form consensus around than the environment. First, while people might rationally recognize that the free market will never again produce the housing we need for a diverse workforce, there’s a huge visceral reaction against accepting that reality: “What do you mean the market doesn’t work?” When rationality meets viscera, viscera usually win.

Second, while people rationally recognize we need workforce housing, they viscerally object to putting it near their home. Again, viscera win. So the reason to make workforce housing the plan’s second priority is to force the discussion: “What do you think about workforce housing? If you’re against it, are you willing to live with the ‘only the rich can live here’ consequences? If you’re for it, how much should there be and where should it go?” Without forcing such big-picture clarity now, every development proposal over the next several years will produce yet another battle royale, defeating the very purpose for revising the plan in the first place.

If we can briefly, simply, directly, and unambiguously prioritize conservation and sense of community, everything else – free-market housing, commercial development, transportation, and all other prospective uses of land – will fall into place. More importantly, if we can establish clear land use priorities, they can then form the basis of a decision-making matrix that can be used not just by planning officials, but by developers and the community as a whole. The point? Whether in dealing with teens or land use, the clearer the rules, the less the angst. And the less the angst, the greater the chances of any discussion focusing on a proposal's merits rather than the process (or on not being heard, or on not being appreciated, or...).

So, to be short, simple, direct, and unambiguous, here's what I hope will happen next with the planning process, especially the next draft of the "Themes and Policies" document:

1. Short – the entire document is no more than 7,000 words (roughly four times the length of this column)
2. Simple – A few prioritized goals
3. Direct – State those goals clearly
4. Unambiguous – base it on one or two Statements of Ideal, and completely avoid waffle-words like "balance" and "quality."

All this may sound horribly naive. But given the hormonal, adolescent nature of this community, anything more complex will almost certainly run into the kinds of "you aren't listening" problems we've experienced with the current plan, and continue to experience with the revision process. We've got plenty of evidence that the current approach isn't working well; if Einstein is to be believed, more of the same won't fundamentally change things.

One final thought.

We are the stewards of an extraordinary place. It's also a place facing tremendous external pressures. Sadly, judging by the experiences of other communities, unless we do something bold and assertive, inevitably those pressures will fundamentally compromise both our extraordinary natural resources and our sense of community.

Being bold and assertive isn't easy; certainly the political process doesn't lend itself to such behavior. Choosing to be optimistic though, this valley has a history of taking bold and assertive steps regarding land use, ranging from John D. Rockefeller's expansion of Grand Teton to our regulations against ridgeline and houses over 8,000 square feet. The current comp plan revision offers us another such opportunity; I look forward to seeing how we embrace it.