

Today’s column is an exercise in self-promotion.

Its message: Please make an Old Bill’s Fun Run donation to my non-profit, the Charture Institute.

Why? Two reasons. First, because I think Charture’s work makes Jackson Hole a better place. Second, because Charture’s research provides much of the information I use in these columns.

I founded Charture in 2001 because, during the previous several years, I’d noticed two interesting phenomena. First, according to conventional wisdom, Jackson Hole was a tourist town. During the 1990s, though, while local tourism was stagnant, Teton County’s economy boomed. In particular, in 2000, Grand Teton visitation was 4 percent lower than in 1993 (when the park switched to its current method of counting visitors). Yet from 1993-2000, Teton County’s population increased by a third, and constant dollar per capita income was up by a quarter. (Graph 1)

How could that be? Basic economic theory says that, for a community to grow, its economy has to grow. Yet our alleged economic engine – tourism – was in slow decline.

The second phenomena was that this same paradox – a booming tourism town with a stagnant tourism economy – was occurring in resort communities throughout the country. However, for reasons ranging from narcissism to being overwhelmed by growth, these communities weren’t communicating with, much less learning from, one another. This bothered me a lot, so I set up Charture with two goals: to understand this fundamental “stagnant economic engine/vibrant economy” paradox, and to help these communities learn from each other.

Since Charture’s founding, our work has developed four foci: research, education, action, and funding.

Research – rigorous, fact-based, non-ideological research – is at the heart of everything Charture does. In particular, since its inception, Charture’s goal has been to be the nation’s foremost source of information and understanding about how and why resorts, national park gateways, and other communities in beautiful places are growing and changing so rapidly. Over the years, much of that research has worked its way into this column, in pieces comparing-and-contrasting Jackson Hole with similar communities, as well as in those opining on what is occurring in our community.

Information that isn’t used is a wasted resource, so Charture’s second focus has been to share our findings with other communities. However, early on it became clear that these communities wanted more than just research and education. In particular, while they appreciated having their situation accurately diagnosed, they also wanted a prescription for what to do.

This desire to act has its roots in a phenomenon that links resort, gateway, and other, similar towns around the country: the deep passion people feel for these communities. As it becomes increasingly easier to live anywhere, people are moving places that speak to their heart. As they do, they become deeply invested in their new community, especially in sustaining the qualities that brought them there in the first place. Charture’s research and their own observations helped people understand that, based on a fundamental mis-understanding of what was changing their communities, they were using the wrong tools to address those changes. The question was, what were the right tools?

This led to Charture’s third focus: action. In 2003, we collaborated with the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative to develop Sustaining Jackson Hole, a process which applies the principles of the Toyota Production System to understanding what a community really knows about itself, what it really wants to sustain,

and how to go about sustaining those qualities.

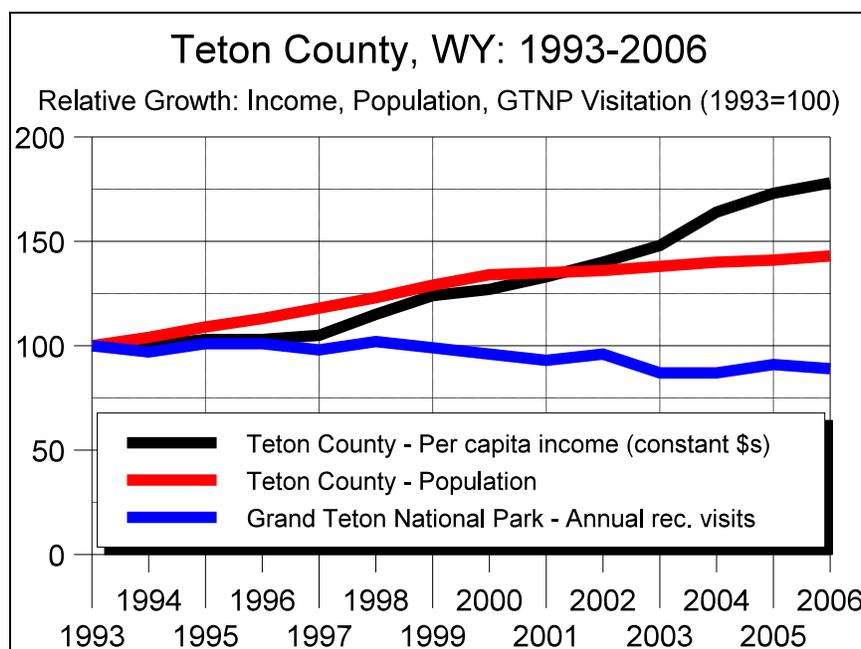
Now in its fourth year, Sustaining Jackson Hole has involved over a thousand participants, and produced the State of Our Community conference, the Jackson Hole Almanac, several Sustaining Jackson Hole mini-Summits, TetonInfo.org, and a variety of other tools, activities, and events. Linking all these together has been a goal-oriented, data-based process for helping shape the future of the community.

Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of Sustaining Jackson Hole is that, in contrast to the extreme contentiousness of planning and land use debates, Sustaining Jackson Hole gives folks a positive way to channel their passion for the area. However, one interesting reality about this community is that people want to do more than talk – they want to act. And often times, in order to act, they need money. Hence Charture’s fourth focus: 1% for the Tetons.

A local version of Yvon Chouinard’s 1% for the Planet, 1% for the Tetons was founded in 2006. Yet in just two years, 1% has raised over one quarter of a million dollars to fund sustainability-related projects in the Tetons region. Starting with fewer than 20 members, over 70 businesses now belong to 1% for the Tetons. Every penny of members’ contributions goes into our grants pool and, thanks to members’ extraordinary generosity and civic-mindedness, last month we were able to grant over \$146,000, nearly 50 percent more than in 2007.

So that’s Charture: research, education, action, funding. TetonInfo.org., Sustaining Jackson Hole, the Jackson Hole Almanac, the State of Our Community, the Greater Yellowstone Conservation Organization Inventory, 1% for the Tetons, and a lot, lot more.

To do all this work takes money, of course, and that’s where you come in. Hopefully, readers will find merit in Charture’s accomplishments and, by extension, how Charture’s work helps shape this column. If you do, any donation you can make will be deeply, deeply appreciated. Thank you in advance for your support of the Charture Institute.



Graph 1