

**Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column**  
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Last Friday night, I went out to eat with friends; some local, some from out of town. The restaurant was loud and busy, but ensconced in our bubble of good food and great companionship, we happily worked our way through a mostly wonderful evening.

I say “mostly” because, right at the end, a very odd thing happened. As we were putting down our credit cards to pay the bill, a woman I didn’t recognize walked by our table, stopped, turned around, eyed us, and finally locked eyes with me. She smiled, and when I smiled back, she came over.

But not to say hi. Instead, she said: “How much longer are you going to be here? This is our table, and we’ve been waiting half an hour for you to leave.” Taken aback, I said: “Well, as you can see, we’re paying the bill right now.” “Good,” she replied. “We’re very hungry, and we’ve been waiting for you for quite a while.”

I was utterly dumbfounded, for nothing like that had ever happened to me in Jackson Hole. Or anywhere else for that matter, save for a popular duck restaurant in Beijing where the practice was for the next flight of customers to hover over a given table, watching the diners eat. To her credit, the hostess came over, asked what happened, and assured me that we were welcome to stay as long as we’d like – in her view, if a table wasn’t ready for a customer, it was solely the restaurant’s fault.

Still, the event rankled, and when we finally got up, I saw the woman again in the lobby. Once again she smiled at me, and when she did, something in me snapped. Agitated, I went over to her and said, in what I felt was a firm but reasonable voice: “I’ve lived here 25 years, ma’am, and that was the rudest thing I’ve ever experienced in Jackson Hole. I don’t know where you’re from, but approaching us like that was completely out of keeping with how we do things in Jackson.”

My guess is that, while the woman’s party was waiting for their (our?) table, the restaurant gave them some free drinks, for my comments did not go unnoticed. Specifically, before our conversation went any further, the woman’s 20-something son came over and started getting in my face about how rude we were for monopolizing their table. Her husband quickly followed suit, but before her entire contingent of large, liquored-up, starving supporters could join in the fun, I walked away. The episode continued to bug me, though, and over the last few days it’s had me thinking a lot about not just our community culture and character, but how vulnerable these qualities may be to the kinds of behavior exhibited by my new-found friend and her family.

As regular readers know, from my perspective the region’s long-term vitality – from both an economic and community character perspective – is utterly dependent on our maintaining the only three qualities which ultimately can not be replicated elsewhere:

- our wildlife
- our landscape
- our culture and character.

As a result, if I were king of Teton County, I’d take three steps, one addressing each quality.

First, to make sure future generations would continue to enjoy healthy wildlife populations, I’d prevent all development in critical wildlife habitat and migration corridors.

Second, once those lands were locked up, I’d ensure that future generations would continue to enjoy our singular scenic vistas by identifying the critical viewsheds on the remaining lands, and prohibiting

development from compromising those views.

Third, to ensure that we don't bifurcate into a community of haves and have-nots, I'd encourage the development of middle-class housing by allowing dense development on those lands which lack habitat, connectivity, or scenic values.

The nice thing about this approach is that it would explicitly link our approach to land use with what makes us distinctive, and in so doing explicitly link our approach to land use to our long-term vitality. And while I think this approach would work pretty well for wildlife and landscape, I don't think this alone would be enough to sustain our community character. This is because, of all three qualities, character is both the most amorphous, and the most vulnerable to the relentless pressure outside economic forces are placing on our land values. One example of this is pressure was highlighted in the recent *News&Guide* story about the push to build more high-end hotels; another can be found in the surge in sales for million dollar-plus homes and lots.

Combining macro-economic trends with basic supply and demand, all long-term signs point to demand for housing in Jackson Hole markedly outstripping supply, meaning prices will continue to rise. And as that happens, the community will become increasingly homogenous, putting at risk the socio-economic diversity which has underpinned our community character for several generations.

What can be done about this? As I say, more density is one option. Another idea is one inspired by a conversation I had years ago with Harry Baxter, the Jackson Hole Ski Corp's original director of marketing. In Harry's view, because of our location, weather, and terrain, Jackson Hole could never compete successfully with mass-market ski areas like Vail or Park City. So why bother? Instead, his vision was to position Jackson Hole as the place in the world where, if you were truly a skier, you needed to ski at least once in your life. You wouldn't go to Jackson Hole to learn to ski. Instead, you had to earn your trip here: Skiing Jackson Hole was your reward for having paid your dues at all the other ski hills out there.

In that spirit, if we are going to succeed long-term as both a tourist destination and community, I think we need to take a different approach to tourism. Right now, from a tourist's perspective, we are utterly disposable, a place which can be treated with as much regard as a soda can or any other consumer good they might use for a couple of days. We ask nothing of tourists except to leave a big pot of money as they breeze through town, and mostly that's all we get.

This is all well and good, I suppose, for it's how tourism is done the world over. However, it does absolutely nothing to distinguish us from any other tourist destination anywhere. Worse still, it does nothing to complement our community character. Instead, by solely emphasizing money, this approach may actually be encouraging the erosion of those aspects of our character which have nothing to do with money; i.e. all those aspects of our character which make Jackson Hole a distinctive and wonderful place to visit and live.

Put another way, Jackson Hole is more than our money, but that reality isn't captured in our approach to tourism. As a result, as the global economy evolves and money plays an increasingly prominent role in our daily lives, the way we currently go about doing tourism will only accelerate a trend toward becoming focused on the almighty dollar.

But I think there's another possibility. If done thoughtfully, tourism holds the potential to re-enforce the qualities of character which make us distinctive, and which make Jackson Hole attractive to so many different types of people.

How might this happen? Hard question, and one far too complex for the remainder of this column. However, I think the ultimate answer has two qualities. One is that we would ask our tourists to do something other than simply spend money; the other is that this something would involve educating tourists about the

values we hold dear, if not actively having them take steps to re-enforce those values.

As always, the devil of this approach would be in the details. That noted, what I'm talking about here is essentially a variant on eco-tourism, which is clearly the next great growth wave in tourism. Arguably no place in North America is better situated to ride that wave, and here's hoping we have the vision and courage to do so. When we do, though, here's also hoping that we pay as much attention to the cultural side of the equation as we do to the environment. The latter is in decent shape; the former is vulnerable indeed.