Jonathan Schechter – "Corpus Callosum" Column
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The theme of today's column is "Four simple questions I'd like the media to ask."

Question 1 is addressed to those who argue it was justifiable for the U.S. to use torture (presumably because it elicited good information): "If Americans were captured and waterboarded, how would you react?"

My assumption is that, as a nation, we would be outraged, and rightfully so. Yet as deeply-felt and sincere as our outrage would be, it would lack an ethical foundation. Why? Because when we used "enhanced interrogation techniques," we not only violated the Golden Rule (that most fundamental of Judeo-Christian tenets), we voluntarily ceded our moral standing. Remarkable.

Question 2 is addressed to the health insurance, pharmaceutical, and other industries which, last week, said they'd find $2 trillion in healthcare-related savings over the next 10 years: "For how long have those savings been sitting there, and why haven't you acted before now?"

Even though industry representatives later backed away from a specific dollar amount, simply raising the possibility of saving hundreds of billions annually suggests they know there's a great deal of waste in the system. And with that implicit acknowledgment, they've undermined their argument that unleashing the private sector is the answer to our health care woes. Further undermining that argument is the fact that our basically free market healthcare system leaves roughly 20 percent of Americans under age 65 uninsured, and another 15 percent underinsured.

In contrast, almost everyone 65 and older is covered by Medicare, that distinctly non-private sector program.

There are clearly good things about our current healthcare system, and there are clearly bad things about any government-controlled system. However, any objective analysis also needs to acknowledge that much is wrong with our current system, and that this system is basically controlled by insurance companies. It also needs to acknowledge that, to pay for their efforts, insurance companies divert around 20 percent of health insurance premiums into non-healthcare costs such as administration, commissions, profit, and the like. In contrast, Medicare's overhead is 2-4 percent.

What's the right answer? I don't know. But given how dysfunctional our healthcare system is, I suspect I'm not alone in my "a pox on both your houses" view.

Question 3a is addressed to those who oppose growth in Teton County and, by extension, oppose how the current draft of the Jackson/Teton County Comprehensive Land Use Plan addresses growth-related issues: "If we greatly restrict our growth, how will our economy stay healthy and our community vibrant?" Question 3b is addressed to local governmental officials: "Why should we trust this plan? Why should we trust you?"

I'm not a planner, nor have I spent hours poring over the plan. As a result, I can't say whether the current draft will make things better, worse, or something in-between. In fact, I'm not sure anyone can. That makes it a perfect Jackson Hole issue: passion and opinions abound; thoughtful and not-so-thoughtful arguments drown each other out; and planners and non-planners alike are making powerful arguments on every side of the issue. Digesting it all, about the only thing I'm sure of is that, before the plan is finally adopted, the current draft will undergo many, many changes.

I'm also sure that three realities are shaping the environment in which the planning debate is occurring.

The first is that we live in a very special place. Jackson Hole inspires tremendous passion – arguably a hormonal, adolescent sort of passion – in residents and visitors alike. As a result, we're aware of, involved in, and care deeply about nearly everything that goes on here. Further, Teton County is growing and changing so rapidly that we fear – with good reason – that the Jackson Hole we moved to and love may disappear on our watch. The plan is supposed to keep this from happening, so it is receiving not just a disproportionate amount of interest, but a disproportionate burden of expectation, hope, and dread.

Second, as a nation, we are increasingly losing trust in our institutions in general, and government in particular.

This loss of trust can traced back hundreds, if not thousands of years, but has been accelerating rapidly since the 1960s. Why? Corporations and politicians today are no more trustworthy or venal than their predecessors. However, there has been a huge shift in the relationship between corporations, government, the media, and the public. In particular, while the public has always been interested in scandal, before Vietnam and Watergate the media had neither the technology nor the inclination to focus on such stories. Over the last 40 years, though, as information sources have proliferated and news cycles become more compressed, news and entertainment have converged, and stories have become shorter, dumber, and more sensationalist. As a result, we have become evermore aware of our institutions' warts, eroding our belief in what they tell us.

The local consequence? While we may have high regard for the individuals who run local government, we have increasingly less faith in local governmental institutions. There's no particular reason for this, no incident or series of incidents which have breached the public's trust. To the contrary – I'd put our local government against any when it comes to both competence and integrity.

It suffers, though, because we do the very human thing of using the same filter to judge local institutions that we use to judge those in Washington DC or Wall Street. As a result, warranted or not, local governmental actions – particularly important ones like the comp plan – carry an ever-increasing burden of skepticism, if not a presumption of guilt.

Third, our economic system's health depends on continued growth, which in turn assumes unlimited natural resources. When modern economic theory was developed centuries ago, this assumption was not unreasonable. Today, it is anything but. Unfortunately, though, economic theory lags well behind this reality – economists have yet to figure out a viable alternative to our current growth-based system. The result? Gridlock: If we don't continue to grow, our economic system will suffer; if we do continue to grow, our natural systems – and perhaps much more – will suffer. And one thing America does poorly is suffer.

Locally, this plays out in yet another hormonal reaction: fear. Our fear is that, if we continue to grow, not only will we jeopardize our natural systems, but also our community character. Yet if we don't, our economy will go in the tank. So we're stuck – big time.

This extraordinarily potent combination of passion, lack of trust, and fear is disfiguring the planning debate. One consequence is that we've placed extraordinarily high expectations on the plan. As a result, we're bound to be dissatisfied, since Schechter's equation for life holds that S=R-E: Satisfaction equals Reality minus Expectations. That's certainly what happened after the 1994 plan, and this time around, the passions and stakes are even higher.

What to do? At a certain level, there is no fix. However, taking the following three steps would temper the situation.

1. All sides need to recognize, acknowledge, and honor the passion each of us has for Jackson

Hole. We also need to recognize that "Jackson Hole" means very different things to each of us.

2. Planners and elected officials need to clearly acknowledge the lack of trust/high degree of skepticism many feel toward government in general, and the plan in particular. They then need to make a clear, simple case for why we can trust not just the plan itself, but the officials – both today and in the future – responsible for executing it. Critically, this argument needs to be given a respectful hearing.
3. Those advocating limited growth need to clearly acknowledge that their position threatens not just economic orthodoxy, but many peoples' social and economic aspirations, both today and in the future. They then need to make a clear, simple case of why their vision will allow our economy to remain healthy, and our character vibrant. Critically, this argument must be framed using the same long-term perspective taken by those who developed and must vote on the plan.

None of this will matter to those with extreme feelings – zealots are never swayed. But at a minimum, taking these steps will help frame the debate for those non-zealots who will both shape the plan today and execute it tomorrow.

Question 4 is addressed to local businesspeople: "How will your business do this summer compared to last? How about the local economy in general?"

Riffing on a "Wisdom of Crowds" theme, my thought is to do an on-line pre-summer survey of dozens, if not hundreds, of members of Jackson Hole's business community (the Chamber of Commerce could also do this). Then, in the fall, we'd compare the predictions to actual performance, and see how well we did in collectively predicting the summer economy.

Whatever the results, they would prove interesting. If we prove to be good forecasters, that will be useful in the future; if we prove to be awful, this knowledge can dampen some of the hormonal angst that always bubbles up before the summer season.

My guess? This summer we'll see at least as many visitors as last year, but lower spending. National park visitation will be strong because people are prioritizing experiences over consumption, and national parks offer cheap, experience-filled vacations. However, once here, tourists won't have a ton of extra money to spend on material goods. As a result, lodging, grocers, outfitters and the like should do reasonably well, while general retailers – particularly high-end retailers – are likely in for another tough season.

This, of course, does not augur well for local government. Like the economy as a whole, local government's finances are based on consumption, the major component of which is retail. As a result, my guess is that taxable sales will be down, and they'll take government revenues down with them.

Worst hit of all, though, will be construction, real estate, and related trades. Over the last several years, we went on a cheap credit bender, especially when it came to the biggest ticket items such as homes, cars, and high-end furnishings. Now that cheap credit's gone, we're in for a period of forced sobriety. As a result, those industries which drank the deepest – construction, real estate, and the like – will suffer the worst case of the DTs.