

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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*“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am not for others, what am I?
And if not now, when?”*
– Rabbi Hillel

“For everyone to whom much is given, of him shall much be required.”
– Luke 12:48

Two columns ago, I wrote about how an economic era was ending in Jackson Hole. Last time, I wrote about what I hope will be our economic future: becoming the world’s first certified green resort community. Should we achieve this, it will provide us with the trifecta of sustainability: ongoing economic prosperity, environmental health, and sense of community. Today I’d like to offer a quick overview of how we might go about becoming the world’s first certified green resort community, and how we might finance that effort.

First things first. Since no program exists for certifying a resort community as green, we’ll have to create one. Why? Because without comprehensive, rigorous, and meaningful standards, we’ll be doing nothing more than committing “green-washing.”

Next, creating such standards will require a broad coalition; achieving them will require a community-wide effort, with the lead taken by an entity other than the government. Why? Because as Schechter’s maxim holds, economies change faster than perceptions, and perceptions change faster than politics.

At its core, becoming a certified green resort community is an economic act, one requiring both subtle and not-so-subtle changes in how we, as a community, go about our lives. That the Town and County are currently taking steps to reduce energy use is an act of enormous political courage, for which they deserve the highest praise. To ask them to do more, though – to ask them to take the lead on setting up and executing a certification program involving not just energy, but all aspects of our community – is asking too much. As a result, while active government involvement will be essential to our becoming a certified green resort community, some other entity will have to take the lead in setting up such a program (it will likely have to be a non-profit, as there is no short-term profit to be made from this effort).

What would such a certification program look like? Something along the lines of the Boy Scout merit badge program, which requires participants to meet rigorous, clearly-defined standards. Meet enough of them, and you achieve a basic level of certification; meet several more, and you achieve a higher level.

Critically, rather than creating all such criteria from scratch, I envision the foundation of the green resort community certification program being extant programs such as those offered by the US Green Building Council and Sustainable Travel International. Such efforts already certify pieces of a green community; the challenge is to tie them together, plug the inevitable holes, and incent communities to constantly strive for higher levels of certification.

Why do this in Jackson Hole? Two reasons – one tactical, one strategic. Tactically, since we’re already pursuing a variety of “green” activities, setting up an overarching program won’t be too much of a reach for us. Will it be easy? No, not at all. But it’s also not beyond our reach.

This leads into the strategic reason. Eventually, someone is going to set up a substantive program for certifying a green resort community. Whoever does will get a first mover advantage. If Jackson Hole is that someone, it will give us a significant and on-going competitive advantage versus every other resort

community.

It will also give us naming rights. When someone does come up with a way to certify green resort communities, the program will become known by the place where it first took hold (think of the Kyoto protocols or New Orleans jazz). If we do it first, communities around the world will aspire to become “Jackson Hole certified,” giving us a p.r. benefit of immeasurable value.

We could also work on the demand side of the equation by setting up a program for certifying “green travelers.” To date, “green tourism’s” focus has been on the supply side; i.e. properties and outfitters catering to tourists. If we can set up parallel Jackson Hole standards for certifying green tourists, here too we can reap an enormous and on-going p.r. bonanza.

Setting up a green resort community certification process will require a lot of hard work; becoming a certified green resort committee will require even more of us, ranging from behavioral changes to investments in infrastructure. How to fund such efforts? Three local sources come to mind: one extant, one dormant, and one waiting to be developed.

The extant source is 1% for the Tetons, a program I run. In just two years, 1% for the Tetons has raised over a quarter of a million dollars for local sustainability projects. As more businesses join, this funding source will only become larger and more important.

The dormant source is the bed tax. In recent years, the community has repeatedly rejected the bed tax because its proceeds must be spent on marketing. However, if the bed tax can be linked to marketing through community “greening,” it can generate hundreds of thousands of dollars for local sustainability efforts.

The source waiting to be developed is one which, if it happens, will become a centerpiece of our efforts to become the world’s first certified green resort community: having the Jackson Hole airport become the world’s first carbon-neutral airport.

Here is another huge p.r. coup waiting to be grabbed – imagine the on-going publicity that will come to the world’s first carbon-neutral airport. And since ours is the only commercial airport in a national park, why shouldn’t we be the ones who not only make that effort, but get that publicity?

How to do this? First, as part of the current airport EIS process, the park service can use its leverage to encourage the airport to go carbon neutral. Second, to fund that effort, the airport can raise landing fees a modest amount for both private and commercial aircraft. Those fees would then be used in two ways: to buy carbon offsets, and to fund local carbon-reduction projects.

Using carbon offsets is somewhat problematic, but is better than doing nothing. Best of all, they’re cheap – for instance, the average cost of offsetting a private jet’s emissions is about one half of one percent of its hourly operating costs. If we charge more than that, we can use the additional money to fund local carbon reduction projects (e.g. funding photovoltaic systems throughout the valley).

Since the airlines will inevitably pass the carbon-neutral surcharge along to their customers, when they do we can ask them to clearly label the surcharge, turning it into an educational opportunity. By doing this, we’ll not only teach airline visitors about Jackson Hole’s efforts to keep its environment healthy, we’ll also make them active participants in the effort. Given that air travel is a discretionary expense, asking visitors to pay a small surcharge to help sustain their destination seems a modest request indeed. Further, by turning that surcharge into an educational tool, we can encourage our visitors to take back to their communities what they learned in Jackson Hole.

So now we have a vision: become the world's first certified green resort community, and have the world's first carbon-neutral airport. Can we pull it off? Possibly, because it meets all three parts of Rabbi Hillel's challenge.

First, it's in our self-interest. If we become the world's first certified green resort community, it will give a permanent boost to our tourism economy, an ample incentive for Jackson Hole's businesses.

Second, if we orient our behaviors toward preserving Jackson Hole's long-term environmental health, it will give us something to strive for beyond mere self-interest, thereby satisfying both Rabbi Hillel and St. Luke.

This, I think, is key. Most of us did not move here for economic reasons, but somehow Teton County has become the richest county in the richest country in the history of the world. Under nearly every ethical system, such bounty obliges us to give something back. In our case, we have the singular opportunity to demonstrate that a human community and its surrounding natural environment can not just co-exist, but thrive. Since the industrial revolution began, no other community has ever done this; again, why not us?

Finally, the time is now because the longer we wait to act, the weaker our current, fading economy will become (and the greater the chances that someone else will beat us to the "first mover" punch).

What I propose will be hard work, requiring us to both think and act differently than we ever have. But we have all the pieces for success: smart people, a passion for this place, a large number of "green" actions already going on, and a willingness to address our economic malaise by considering new ways of doing things.

Can we rise to the challenge? I hope so. For the simple reality is that, through a combination of good luck and a lousy economy, we have an opportunity unique in the history of the world. If we so choose, we can do something which is not only in our own self-interest, but which can demonstrate to the rest of the world that a human community can, in fact, simultaneously prosper in all three of its basic elements: economic, social, and environmental. History offers such opportunities to few people and even fewer communities; here's hoping we seize this gift we've been given.