

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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“For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.”
Luke 12:48 (King James version)

To set the stage for this and my next two columns, I am going to plagiarize myself.

For well over a decade, I’ve been involved with sustainability. Around a decade ago, this work led to what has become the foundational theme of this column: Perhaps more than any other place on earth, Jackson Hole has potential to show the world how a healthy modern human community can successfully co-exist with a healthy natural environment. Further, the closer we come to fulfilling that potential – the closer we come to being a truly sustainable community – the better off we and the world will be.

Call this idea “Jackson Hole: The Model Sustainable Community,” or “Model Community” for short. In a large nutshell, here’s what I mean.

Teton County enjoys three extraordinary gifts:

1. We are the wealthiest county in the wealthiest country in the history of the world.
2. We are among the most highly-educated people in arguably the most highly-educated country in the history of the world.
3. Our valley lies in the heart of the healthiest, most intact ecosystem in the lower 48, if not the entire industrialized world.

Combined, these gifts give us the opportunity – and I believe the moral imperative – to address the most pressing problem facing the world today: figuring out how healthy modern human communities can successfully co-exist with healthy natural environments.

By “modern communities” I mean those in the industrialized world, and since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, modern societies have been unable to reconcile encouraging economic growth with maintaining ecosystem health and integrity. Adding urgency to the issue is the ever-increasing power of our technologies: with each passing day, we further tip the balance between homo sapiens’ post-Industrial Age ability to degrade ecosystems and the ability of the world’s post-Ice Age natural systems to replenish them.

Given that the health of our species is inexorably tied to the health of our planet, by definition the current pattern is unsustainable. This reality is exacerbated by three basic facts: the world’s population is exploding; already-powerful technologies are becoming even more so; and seemingly healthy systems – both natural and human – can rapidly collapse in ways which at best take us by surprise (e.g. last year’s financial meltdown), and at worst cannot be fixed (e.g. extinctions).

So there’s a problem. Further, it’s getting worse and cannot continue indefinitely. All that is clear. What’s not clear is how long we have before something really bad happens. Decades? Centuries? We simply don’t know. Yet even though having something really bad happen is a risk we can’t afford, we’re taking it anyway.

The good news is that we know humans contribute to this problem and can do something about it. For this to happen, though, some one has to figure out how modern society and the natural world can successfully co-exist, and some place has demonstrate that they can. Because of our gifts, that one should be us, and that place should be here.

Jackson Hole is singularly positioned – not just in the world, but in the history of the world – to be the

leader in this effort. But given that many of us moved here to play or otherwise detach ourselves from the rest of the world, why should we bother? Because of St. Luke's moral imperative. While figuring out how to become a "Model Community" may not be an obligation we want, it's one which can't be separated from the benefits bestowed upon us by Jackson Hole's three extraordinary gifts.

What does this mean in particular? Simply this. With all our gifts, if we can't figure out how a healthy modern human community can successfully co-exist with a healthy environment, who can? And if we can't, what long-term hope is there for our species?

On the positive side though, if we can figure it out, we'll give the world a model to emulate. That's an opportunity few communities in world history have ever enjoyed; the question is whether we can rise to it.

Coming from this perspective, last spring I proposed that Jackson Hole work to define, and then become, the world's first certified "green" resort community. It remains my belief that so doing would not only fulfill our moral obligation to lead, but also secure our future.

What do I mean by "secure our future"? Because the local environment is the wellspring of both our economy and community character, if we secure its health, we secure all our key values, including our quality of life. And if we are able to pull off becoming the world's first certified green resort community, the resulting publicity – more than we can ever afford to buy – will also permanently secure our tourism economy and related qualities.

So that's me plagiarizing me. Given all this, let me turn to the subject of today's column and the two to follow: the recently-held Energy Sustainability Summit, becoming a certified green resort, and their implications for our future.

First, full disclosure. Besides attending the Energy Sustainability Summit, I was tangentially involved in its planning. Additionally, my 1% for the Tetons program funded the greenhouse gas emissions inventory which will provide a baseline for judging the efficacy of some of Jackson Hole's future energy conservation efforts.

That noted, here are my four conclusions about the Energy Sustainability Summit.

First, it was a very successful event, generating a lot of enthusiasm among local officialdom for making us more energy-efficient and self-reliant. Mayor Barron and his team did a tremendous job, overcame a large number of hurdles, and pulled off something special. They deserve our deepest thanks.

Second, over the next couple of years, local officials will engage in a lot of behind-the-scenes work – the nitty-gritty of major government programs – to put in place the programs and financing needed to improve our energy efficiency and self-reliance. This is important stuff which we need to support. However, we also need to be patient, because major results will take years.

Third, all the nitty-gritty involved to make these programs work will be hopelessly "inside baseball," the warp-and-woof of bringing major government efforts into existence. As a result, there will be a significant disconnect between what is being envisioned – and right now, things are just at the visioning stage – and any sort of meaningful public involvement. That disconnect is hugely problematic, because unless the energy efficiency/self-reliance effort actively involves a majority of the community, it will never come close to meeting its potential.

Put another way, I came out of the conference with a clear idea of where speakers would like Jackson Hole to be in five-to-ten years. However, I have no idea where they think we should or will be in the next five-to-ten months. And I have no idea of what you or I or most people can do to make any sort of

contribution toward a more energy-efficient future.

Why is that a problem? Because simply asking people to passively sit back and wait for officialdom to take care of things won't work – our interests will inevitably turn in other directions. Yet right now, the only people who have any sense of what to do next are a handful of government and utility officials.

Fourth, while focusing on energy is vital, it simply isn't enough.

To the extent there's a plan for moving us toward energy efficiency and self-reliance, it basically involves making our buildings more energy efficient and creating energy locally (e.g. putting photovoltaic panels on every roof). The effort needed to make this happen will combine elements of a government infrastructure project and public-private partnership.

In its early phases, the plan will involve raising lots of money, conducting a pilot project on a small group of buildings, evaluating lessons learned, and slowly rolling out the concept across the community. Ultimately, to fully execute something like this will require tens of millions of dollars and take up to two decades. Also, like most government infrastructure projects, it will be basically a top-down effort, requiring a lot of work within local government and Lower Valley, but asking little of residents except to agree to have their buildings made more energy efficient.

If all this happens, it will be a great and needed thing for the community. The proposed approach is also praiseworthy, because prudence, logistics, and good government require us to go slow-but-steady. However, from my "Model Community" perspective, it also presents three fundamental problems.

The first is temporal. While no one explicitly used the phrase, one of the themes underlying the conference was Martin Luther King's "fierce urgency of now." Between global warming, international security concerns, and how vulnerable the economy is to energy prices, we desperately need to make significant changes in how we produce and use energy, and do so soon. But the envisioned local effort will take years, if not decades, to reach fruition.

The second problem is depth. As I suggest above, as currently envisioned, this plan requires a lot from government and Lower Valley Energy, but little from the populace. This is a recipe for failure, for active government plus passive citizenry will not produce the kind of lasting changes needed for healthy human communities co-existing with a healthy natural environment.

The third problem is breadth. Energy use is important; vitally important. But we could dramatically reduce our energy use and greenhouse gas emissions and still not be very green, much less sustainable (for sustainability involves not just environmental concerns, but economic and social ones as well). Most critically, we could dramatically reduce our energy use and greenhouse gas emissions and still really screw up Jackson Hole. Other "nice" places have been pretty well screwed up in the past, and while we may be special, we're not that special.

None of these problems should keep us from pursuing becoming more energy efficient and self-reliant, or reducing greenhouse gasses – all are terribly important goals. However, for us to truly fulfill our "Model Community" potential, we need to look at all aspects of how our human community interacts with our natural environment. To do otherwise will make us like a body-builder focusing on just one muscle group – our clear strength in one area won't offset our weaknesses in all the rest.

What to do? I'll explore that in my next column.