

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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In my last column, I discussed how Jackson Hole is coming to the end of an economic era. Today I'll focus on what the future might hold.

Jackson Hole's economy is about to experience its fourth major change of the past 125 years. Change one was from hunter-gatherer to agriculture; change two was from agriculture to industrial tourism. In both cases, residents consciously chose to pursue a different type of economy. This was not the case for the third change – even though we didn't understand it at the time, roughly two decades ago our economy changed from one driven by industrial tourism to one driven by lifestyle, in particular a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption.

That era is over, killed off by the collapse of the financial markets. So what's next for the local economy? My hope is that we will once again consciously pursue a specific economic future – this time, having Jackson Hole become the world's first certified green resort community.

Why choose this future? Three reasons:

1. Because we can;
2. Because it will give us a permanent and impregnable competitive advantage; and
3. Because it will guarantee our long-term economic prosperity, environmental health, and community character, the three pillars of sustainability.

My advocacy for having Jackson Hole become the world's first certified green resort community is grounded in two basic economic realities. First, for the past couple of decades, our economic growth has been driven by a combination of investment income, construction, and, to a lesser extent, tourism. Over the next few years, only tourism – in particular, high-end tourism – has any prospect for growth. However, since high-end tourism is also the only growth option for every other resort community, the competition will be fierce. Distinguishing ourselves from everyone else is the key strategic challenge facing Jackson Hole.

Second, competition being what it is, eventually some place will label itself the world's first certified green resort community. When it does, that community will gain a huge competitive advantage. That advantage is there for the taking; Jackson Hole should claim it.

Why? Why should we target becoming the world's first certified green resort community, a concept which doesn't even exist? Because it's the surest way to guarantee the continuation of all the qualities the community holds most dear, starting with our economic prosperity.

As tourism becomes more competitive, the most successful resorts will be those selling a unique product – something truly unique, not just p.r. hype. Those with such a product will be able to name their price; those without one will be stuck selling a commodity, forced to compete on price. Because of Jackson Hole's cost structure, the latter is a contest we can't win. The former, however, is a game Jackson Hole is well-suited to play.

Why? Because we have two qualities which distinguish us from every other resort community in the world: our national parks and our wildlife. The competition can imitate or even duplicate everything else we offer (e.g. skiing, restaurants, luxury hotels). But only a handful of other places are home to two national parks, and no other area in the lower 48 has our quality of wildlife. Combine these with our level of sophistication, and we are truly unique in the world. That's the sell to tourists, particularly high-end tourists. Now all we have to do is capitalize on it.

How? By using our parks and wildlife as the basis for developing and following a program which certifies green resort communities. The key word is “community.” There are already programs which certify individual buildings, lodges, and outfitters; the next logical step is to create a program setting standards for an entire community. These standards would begin with the natural environment. They would then add community-wide behaviors which, when put together, demonstrate how effectively a resort community works to sustain its environmental quality; i.e. to sustain the asset upon which its tourism and lifestyle economies rest.

For Jackson Hole, this vision is compelling for at least two reasons. One is that the health of the natural world will almost certainly continue to degrade. As it does, the better we can preserve our environmental quality, the greater our competitive advantage will be.

Part of preserving our environment will be steps we take locally. However, we also need the rest of the world to do its part. We can accomplish both through setting and living up to community-wide green standards. In so doing, we can show the world how a community can both be green and prosper.

The other compelling reason is that becoming a certified green resort community will not a huge reach for us. For starters, we already have the necessary environmental quality. Equally importantly, we are also already taking many actions – recycling and energy conservation programs, revisions to our land use plan and building codes, and the like – which, if put together properly, can serve as the foundation for making us a certifiably green community.

To make this happen will involve coordinating a lot of moving parts, and require a lot of money. In my next column, 'll talk about some of those moving parts, as well as share some thoughts on where that money might come from.