

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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If it weren't our local hospital, watching St. John's implode would be merely fascinating. Because it is our local hospital, it's also tragic.

Two things about Jackson Hole never seem to change: our memories remain short, and our angst runs high. Apparently something deep in our collective psyche – maybe the same adrenaline junkie quality which brought so many of us here – requires us to have at least one community crisis at all times, some seemingly cataclysmic event that jacks up our outrage until it's supplanted by the next crisis.

Sometimes these prove to be relatively minor crises. For example, a year ago we were atwitter because high gas prices were threatening our summer tourism economy. Today, it's the recession – same emotion, different cause, no memory that somehow we survived it.

Sometimes, the crisis is a bit more serious. For example, a couple of years ago, there was strong consensus among the planning, development, and conservation communities that the comprehensive land use plan was hopelessly out of date. Now, after a two year effort to modernize it, there's even greater consternation about its proposed replacement. Amazingly, our collective Alzheimer's is such that some folks are demanding that we continue using the current plan, the one people were only too ready to discard 24 months ago.

Then there are the crises which are truly serious, such as the one currently engulfing St. John's. Last year at this time, the big crisis facing St. John's was the proposal to convert it from a public non-profit to a private non-profit. Had that idea gone through, new problems would have been created, but likely nothing on the order of the leadership and governance crisis the hospital currently faces.

However, its failure instead triggered a chain of events that led to the current crisis, one that will likely engulf the hospital long after the board removes the current CEO. In particular, the failure of the governance change led to the election of three new board members last November, all of whom ran against the board which considered (although ultimately rejected) that change. As is their prerogative, this new board challenged the status quo, so much so that, any day now, the hospital will be without a CEO, a COO, and a CFO, creating an unprecedented leadership void at St. John's. How will that void be filled? No one knows, a less-than-ideal scenario.

What makes things even more interesting is that, as a community, we normally have our crises serially. Currently, however, we're doing them in parallel – by remanding the draft of the comp plan update back to the planning staff, the county planning commission has brought to a head a separate-but-related crisis in another passion-filled element of our community.

The comp plan crisis is less significant than the one facing St. John's, but has equally powerful implications for the long term. This is because much of the reason it took us 15 years to revisit the increasingly unwieldy 1994 comp plan was the brutality of the politics surrounding that plan's adoption. And even though the 1994 plan began proving problematic within a few years of its adoption, the vitriol surrounding it proved so traumatic that it took our elected officials well over a decade to screw up the courage to revisit it. Unfortunately, since the plan was designed to be revisited every 5 years, it became increasingly cumbersome at an increasingly rapid pace. My concern is that the increasingly nasty quality of public discussion around the current draft will result in the new plan – whatever it may be, whenever it may be adopted – suffering from the same “no way we're opening that can of worms again” fate.

Tying the planning and hospital crises together is their political nature. During the eight years I was a

St. John's trustee, we hired two new administrators. Both times, the head hunter told us that, as a public hospital, our applicant pool was limited because many good candidates did not want to subject themselves to the politics related to a public board. Years ago, this reality, plus the stability inherent in a private non-profit governance structure, led me and several other former trustees to begin advocating for a change in St. John's governance mechanism. However, for reasons both good and bad, the effort failed, and for both good and ill, St. John's will continue as a public hospital for quite some time. Unfortunately, when St. John's begins its search for not just a new administrator, but an entire administrative team, the extreme politics surrounding both the hospital and the comp plan will make the head hunter's job all the more difficult. One likely result? We'll have to pay through the nose to get anyone good to consider becoming St. John's CEO.

Arguably, Jackson Hole is blessed like no other place in the world. Not only are we the wealthiest county in the wealthiest country in the history of the world; we're also one of the most highly-educated counties in the most highly-educated country in the history of the world. And while aesthetics and environmental quality are much harder qualities to quantify, only one other county in America has even part of two national parks within its border. Combine all these qualities and more, and it's pretty easy to make a case that we are privileged beyond any standard the world has ever known.

So what do we do with that privilege? We clearly exhibit a deep and powerful strain of noblesse oblige: while giving back is also extraordinarily (and disturbingly) difficult to quantify, few places are as generous with their time and money as Teton County.

But perhaps because of this combination of money and education – not to mention drive, ego, leisure time, and a culture of tolerating others' actions and opinions – we also have a remarkable ability to tear ourselves apart. To say this gets in the way of us fulfilling our potential as a community is an exceptional understatement.

Sadly, we as a community are about to learn – or, more precisely, re-learn – a basic lesson about the human condition, namely that it's much easier to break something apart than it is to build it. Thanks to a group of crackerjack employees and some selfless doctors, the hospital will continue to serve patients reasonably well. But there's no way around the fact that the governance and leadership crisis the hospital is currently experiencing will take a long time to resolve itself. Ditto the mess the comp plan process has become.

What's interesting about both messes is that they were reasonably predictable. What's less predictable is what lessons we'll learn from either. One possibility is that, if only we elect "good" officials, then everything will be okay. However, that's a canard of the highest order, for how often have we consciously elected "bad" officials? More disturbing still is that the current tumult will make it that much less appealing for competent, conscientious folks to want to run in the first place – who needs the hassle?

What I hope we'll learn is a fundamental truth about a place as complex and passionate as Jackson Hole: Unless and until we as a community (or a hospital, or what have you) can develop a clear and widely-accepted set of fundamental principles, we will inevitably tear ourselves apart every few election cycles. It doesn't matter which elected body we're discussing: county commission, hospital board, town council, what have you. Ultimately, none of these bodies will be any more effective than whatever principles they can turn to and ask "How does this proposed action match up to our core principles?"

I tried to make this point in my last column, in particular pointing out how great it is that the proposed comp plan has a Statement of Ideals at its core, and how sad it is that the hospital does not. For example, imagine that, a year ago, the hospital board adopted this Statement of Ideal: "Every patient, every time, will get exactly the care he or she needs, at exactly the right time, with no waste, in an atmosphere of complete safety for everyone concerned: patient, provider, and family." How might having that Statement as a guiding star affect the current deliberations? Certainly they couldn't be any worse; with luck, such a Statement of

Ideal could have elevated those discussions above what I can only imagine is their current personality-driven place.

My advocacy of Statements of Ideal drew a lot of reaction, most of it keeping with our community's current attack-and-destroy ethos: I was dismissed as proposing something "naive" or "bizarre" or "what we already have in a different package." Yet, somehow, using this naive and bizarre and same-old, same-old Statement of Ideal concept has allowed Toyota to become the world's best manufacturer, and transformed under-achieving hospitals into some of the nation's finest. Apparently, along with needing crises, we as a community also seem averse to learning from others, apparently preferring to make the same mistakes over and over. In Einstein's definition, that's lunacy, a quality which, along with the rain, seems to be permeating Teton County's air this spring.