

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
Jackson Hole News&Guide – January 2, 2008

In my last column, I offered up some predictions about the local economic scene. Today, I’ll riff on that by sharing a few “big picture” questions on three related subjects: our community, politics, and the environment. As I see it, while we’ll face these questions in 2008, their answers will affect us – our community, nation, and world – for years to come.

Whither Jackson Hole?

Last week’s *News&Guide* featured the most remarkable juxtaposition I’ve ever seen in a local paper: two advertising inserts, one for the Marquis Jet card, the other for C-A-L Ranch stores. In case you missed them, the former promoted 25 hours of private jet service, starting at only \$119,900; the latter promoted big discounts on Christmas decorations and insulated work clothes.

I had two reactions. First, I fervently hope the Marquis Jet folks seize this opportunity and start pimping their rides with deeply-discounted C-A-L Ranch Christmas lights and ornaments.

Second, I can’t conceive of any other paper in the world featuring inserts for both C-A-L Ranch stores and Marquis Jet cards. As a result, I’ve been left wondering: “What does it say about our community that these two wildly different businesses, with their wildly different demographics, both feel they have a customer base here?” My conclusion is that these two inserts serve as a striking metaphor for how fast, and how dramatically, Jackson Hole is changing.

When C-A-L Ranch began 49 years ago, Jackson Hole was a perfect target for its mix of agriculture-related products. That they continue to advertise with the *News&Guide* suggests we still are. The same logic suggests we’ve also become a place teeming with people who, while unable to afford their own private jet, are still able to pre-pay \$120,000 for the right to use one for a day or two.

To me, this screams volumes about the difficulty local leaders – both elected and otherwise – face in trying to guide Jackson Hole as it evolves from its ranching heritage to its private jet future. How we manage that transition – and in particular, how the upcoming Comp Plan tries to reconcile our ranching heritage with the extraordinary pressures the global economy is placing on our valley – is one of the key questions Jackson Hole will face in 2008.

Whither politics?

Speaking of elected officials, 2008 is obviously going to be a huge year at the ballot box: nationally, statewide, and locally. Regardless of office, I would ask all incumbents one basic question: “What specific things have you done to warrant re-election?” I would ask all challengers a similar question: “What specific things would you do differently than the incumbent?”

These, to me, are no-brainers, but I have yet to hear either asked of any candidate. Two other questions – equally applicable to incumbent and challenger – also suggest themselves.

The first is pretty straightforward, but also never seems to be asked: “Given that, in most offices, a majority vote is needed to accomplish anything, how will you meet your promises and fulfill your platform?”

The second is a variation on this theme, and it depresses me greatly that it needs to be asked: “Why should we believe anything you say?”

I see myself as an optimistic person, one who desperately wants to believe in our country and its systems. However, particularly on the national scene, the events of the last decade or so have left me in a place where, any time an official opens his or her mouth, my knee-jerk reaction is: “Why should I believe you?”

I don't know all the causes behind this feeling; contributors include a stunning track record of officials engaged in outright lying and cheating, truth-spinning so brazen as to insult one's intelligence, and foaming-at-the-mouth partisanship and ideology. Combine this with changes in communication technology that make immediate trivial occurrences far more important than long-term thinking or evaluation, and you get a political environment in which it is increasingly difficult to be anything but deeply skeptical of any pronouncement, motivation, or action. I hate it, but that's the place I find myself in, and I don't think I'm alone.

Recently I asked my father about how, when he was a young man, his generation viewed the future. He replied there was an optimism that doesn't seem to exist today. However naive that view was, he felt his generation shared a basic belief that the future would be better than the past, and that leaders made well-considered and well-motivated decisions focused on that brighter tomorrow. My sense is that optimism began to erode in the 1960s, suffered further with Watergate, and has basically disappeared during the last decade or so. The net result is that perhaps the fundamental challenge facing our next president is to find a way to reverse this pattern, to lead in a way that will allow people to once again feel good about themselves, their country and the future.

Fortunately, this level of our toxicity has not yet hit our local political scene: While we may disagree with any one individual's views, there's a general consensus that our elected officials and other leaders are honorable and well-intentioned. However, as we transform from a C-A-L Ranch community to a Marquis Jet community – and as we do, face increasingly greater economic and land use stresses – it will become evermore difficult to find consensus about our future. With that, it will become increasingly likely that the skepticism marking national politics will work its way into the local scene. To keep that from happening, I think one of the great challenges facing local leaders is to find points of commonality around which we can build. If they can't, the alternative is depressing indeed.

Whither the environment?

The environment is at the heart of the fundamental question of our time: “Can humans thrive as a species in a way that allows all other species to thrive as well?”

Before the Industrial Revolution, this was not an issue: there were not enough people on earth to make a huge difference to other species, and those humans who did exist did not have the technological ability to fundamentally alter the earth's systems. Neither of those statements is true any longer: in just the past century, the world's population has increased from 1.7 to 6.6 billion; and conservative estimates suggest that, due to human behavior, current extinction rates of species are 100-1,000 times higher than “natural” rates.

While there is a lot of confusion and controversy over man's interaction with the environment, three things are very clear:

- The powers unleashed by the Industrial Revolution – those powers which have allowed us as a species to multiply and flourish as never before possible – have also greatly disrupted the natural processes upon which the planet's systems are based;
- Our ability to alter the natural world far exceeds our understanding of that world; and
- Post-industrial societies have not yet figured out how to behave – much less govern themselves – in ways which allow them to both enjoy the fruits of the Industrial Revolution and keep ecosystems viable.

As we struggle to find a way to thrive both economically and ecologically, one other thing has also become

clear: Places which continue to enjoy relatively healthy environments – Jackson Hole being a prime example – are also becoming increasingly popular as places to visit and live. As a result, the answer to this fundamental question – “How do we as a species thrive while allowing all other species to thrive?” – has exceptional relevance for this community’s long-term economic health. The more our environmental quality is degraded – whether due to our own actions or those of a larger, more amorphous world – the more we revert to becoming little more than a cold, remote, unattractive place to live. Conversely, the more we can preserve and sustain our environmental quality, the better our chances of continuing to enjoy the bounty with which we are so clearly blessed.