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OPINION

## Could COVID shatter our summer?

Guest Shot / By Robert Frodeman

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After a bad start, Teton County has made progress in containing the coronavirus. The bad start wasn't our "fault," per se; it was built into being a tourist destination.

As we can see on the Teton County COVID-19 dashboard, the incidence of new cases has dropped. We're at a point where we can start opening things back up. We shouldn't be surprised if the number of cases grows again, but if we're prudent, we should be able to resume parts of our life.

This, however, may be a mere pause before the coming storm. We need to brace ourselves for the next challenge Teton County faces: summer tourist season.

In one sense we've been fortunate in that COVID appeared toward the end of ski season. So far the shutdown has run through mud season: Our streets and hotels would have been largely empty in any case. This gave us the break needed to tamp down the virus.

Now, however, Jackson Hole is in danger of becoming a petri dish.

Let's remember the numbers. 3.4 million people visited Grand Teton National Park last year, and visitation at Yellowstone was even higher: 4.1 million. Most of these people come to Jackson. This year we can expect a drop-off of perhaps 50, 80 or even 90%. But even at 10 percent of last year's visitation, hundreds of thousands of people will pass through Jackson — eating at dozens of restaurants, sleeping in the more than 200 hotels, visiting our bars, packing the parking lots, and taking the Jenny Lake shuttle over to Hidden Falls.

It would be hard to design a more perfect environment for spreading the coronavirus: tens of thousands of strangers from around the world, mingling in dozens of locations. And the cast of characters changes every day!

Then, having been seeded with the virus, our visitors return to communities across the nation and

the world. We could be looking at not only a local but also a national and international disaster, as visitors return to their workplaces and homes. Not the kind of publicity we want.

This is the next potential crisis we face. (Potential, for it is still possible that summer temperatures will knock down the virus.)

There's no easy solution, either: if we shut the doors to Jackson, say by closing the national parks, we'll kill our economy. If they remain open — and the parks now seem to be opening sometime this month — it could quickly overwhelm our health infrastructure. Our medical infrastructure is built to support a population of 20,000 plus some visitors; a crisis could mean that we would need an infrastructure for 400,000 or more.

What choices do we have? The Jackson Town Council and the Teton County Commissioners are wrestling with these questions right now. I'm not privy to all these discussions, but it's likely that preparations are being made to keep close tabs on a resurgence of the outbreak, and to be ready to re-institute a lockdown if it becomes necessary.

Perhaps the best thing we can do now is to understand the challenge that we're likely to face. That will help us to respond quickly if conditions change again. After all, it's not as if we can put gates up at Teton Pass, Hoback Junction and Moran and simply keep visitors out.

We live in a special place, and it looks like we are going to be facing a special set of challenges.

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*Robert Frodeman writes on technology and the environment. He lives in Hoback Junction. Guest Shots are solely the opinion of their authors.*