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Airport closure offers pause to consider the future

Guest Shot / By Robert Frodeman

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Jackson Hole Airport is closing this spring. It will be shut from April 11 until June 27. That's if construction goes according to plan, a thought that sends shivers down the spines of locals familiar with local construction projects.

But what if we just shut down the airport permanently?

I speak in jest, but this was on the table on several occasions in the past. Arguing that a national park is no place for an airport (the Sierra Club sued on more than one occasion), there have been suggestions that we rely on the Idaho Falls airport (100 miles away), put the airport in Driggs (with a tunnel through Teton Pass), or place the airport at Daniel Junction (65 miles away in Sublette County; this was Laurence Rockefeller's preference).

It's fun to speculate on these alternative timelines. Imagine Driggs or Bondurant rather than Jackson as the home of jet-setting billionaires. Of course these suggestions were only possible before air flight became a major way for people to reach Jackson. In 2021 the airport saw more than a half million enplanements. Jackson now has direct connections to 21 destinations by a wide range of carriers — American, Delta, United, Alaska, Allegiant, Frontier and Sun Country Airlines. But there was no commercial service into Jackson until Frontier started flying here in 1959.

The irony here is that for all the complaints about this being the only major airport located within a national park, its existence predates the park's creation. It began as a dirt landing strip in the 1930s, after a couple cowboys cleared off some brush and the owner of the land (Rockefeller) looked the other way. Grand Teton National Park was created in 1929, but after locals rejected a federal takeover of the flats the park only covered the range's major peaks and the lakes at their base. It took until 1943 for the area in front of the Tetons to be designated as Jackson Hole National Monument. The next year Teton County Commissioner Clifford Hansen pushed for its establishment, arguing that it "has little to add to the picture of the West." Then again, Hansen's ranch and grazing permits were affected by the creation of the monument.

In 1950 the peaks and the flats were merged into one park. The airport now had a new landlord: In 1955 the National Park Service leased the airport site to the town and county. The Park Service has turned down the lengthening of the landing strip to 8,000 feet (this spring's construction is putting down a new bed for the current 6,300-foot runway, not lengthening it). Neighbors and hikers complain about aircraft noise, and the sex life of the sage grouse is disturbed. But the community has reached an equilibrium with the existence of the airport, notwithstanding the \$50 taxi charge to and from town.

So the airport will stay. But the rising numbers raise another question: when enough is enough. More than a half million people fly here each year. Do we want it to be 750,000? A million? Is there a limit to the number of people and flights we want to bring to Jackson?

Some say yes, we do want to grow visitation — during the shoulder seasons, when the hotels and restaurants are under capacity. Of course, the two parks are harder to visit at these times. And many locals look forward to a break from the crush of summer visitation, which is becoming less noticeable as the tourist season has extended. But this avoids the more crucial question of summer visitation. We're already over capacity in the summer; shouldn't any plan to extend the season include thinking about lessening the summer traffic?

A local business group, Jackson Hole Airservice Improvement Resources, aka JH Air, was founded in 2002 to encourage direct flights into Jackson. The trade group uses government grants and business contribution to encourage airlines to fly here by providing minimum revenue guarantees to the airlines. In return, contributing businesses get discounted ski lift passes. The trade group has the right to pursue what it views as its self-interest. On the other hand, the group gets a significant amount of public money: The town of Jackson and Teton County each contribute \$15,000 annually. This \$30,000 is part of \$150,000 the group received in various government grants in 2019.

Given the size of the crowds in the summer, it's time to ask whether this is a desirable use of public money. This discussion should be part of a larger one, in which Jackson, Teton County, and our other local jurisdictions (e.g., the national parks and forests) wrestle with the question of limiting visitation. Three hundred thirty million Americans, and untold numbers of foreign visitors once COVID recedes, can't all be squeezed into the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The Endless Frontier of our forefathers is no more. Adjusting to this new situation means questioning the assumption of endless growth.

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