

## The C Word

Maybe we should take down the fences we have built around Natrona County, and for that matter the state of Wyoming. Maybe we should start looking at competition as a welcome challenge that will instill in us an urgency to get better.

The age of the Internet has effectively removed those fences anyway! All of a sudden businesspersons are finding out that they have viable competition for their product and service. That competition is virtually invisible! They have to either embrace the challenge, or wilt under the pressure while their businesses dwindle. It's just the way it is now! Virtually anything is available on the "net".

Competition has always been sort of a "bad" word in economic development. Economic Development groups tread lightly when someone is interested in the area and appear to be a direct competitor of a local stalwart. It sometimes becomes a political "hot potato". The NIMBY's surface! (Oops, another Acronym – NIMBY means "Not In My Backyard").

Let's take a look. If a community has one grocery store, one service station, one restaurant, one weld shop, one of anything, even one church, do you consider that community economically sound? Would you consider that a healthy and vibrant economy? Some might consider that to be truly monopolistic. No selection, no choices to make, no prices to compare! Captive clientele! Ouch!

When you take the blinders off you see that economies tend to thrive and build when competitive type businesses begin to cluster in the area. Look at the famous Silicon Valley, look at the Detroit auto industry, steel centers; garment districts.....remember when all of those oil companies had district offices in Casper?

The potential benefit to having multiple businesses in similar industries in the same area is amazing. A growing and trained workforce! Suppliers locating in the area due to the sizeable market! Customers locating facilities close to their major suppliers! Transportation and infrastructure designed to accommodate primary industries!

One of the newer concepts in the economic development arena is called "clustering". It's not really new, but it's relatively recent that it has become a recognized form of marketing and building an area economy. Industry really invented it, locating in the proximity of major competitors to "keep an eye on them", take advantage of educational institutions focus on particular expertise's, steal trained employees, and take advantage of the purchasing advantages that come with having your suppliers in your neighborhood.

Ever noticed how many small plastics injection molders there are down in the Fort Collins to Boulder area? Clustered down there to service the computer industry you can bet!

Anyway, economic development groups, as well as groups of economic development groups, now work to market themselves as the “High Tech region of the Northeast”, or the “textile capital of the south”, or whatever seems to drive their economy (or in some instances what they would like to drive their economy). It’s not a bad concept, and for the most part there aren’t too many places that can be all things to all people.

At any rate it is my contention that competition enhances an economy. We need to be “open for business”. It’s very hard to be selective and protective. We have more competition here than we can ever imagine thanks to the “net”. Let’s capitalize on it!