Kim Billimoria on preserving beauty and business in Yellowstone
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My name is Kim Billimoria. I work for the Yellowstone Business Partnership.

The Yellowstone Partnership is a non-profit organization that works on eco-system level. So basically it was founded by a group of business people who recognized that if we’re going to preserve the greater Yellowstone ecosystem – which is one of the last intact ecosystems in the world – that we have to harness the power of business. It’s not enough to just work through litigation, you know environmental litigation. We have to harness the power of business and make the case, the business case for sustainability in order to preserve the ecosystem. And so what the Yellowstone Business Partnership does is it tries to create partnerships across the region and create programs that basically make that business case and engage businesses. So we have a number of different programs. One is on Common Sense, which is a sustainable business operations program, that basically walks businesses through how they can make smart changes to the way they operate that not only benefit their bottom line but also enhance the social and natural assets of the region and help with economic vitality in their communities.

Our biggest asset is the natural resources and the sort of unparalleled wildlife and scenic vistas and just spectacular beauty of the region. And I think with technology now a lot of people can chose where they want to live and then bring their work there, as opposed to choosing where they live based on work. And so I think you’re seeing more and more people who want to live in small communities and want to have access to the outdoors. And they’re moving to the region so I think that’s something communities can capitalize on as those people who want to work, who want to be involved in the school system, they want to take advantage of recreational resources. So I think that’s an opportunity. And I also think there’s a geotourism opportunity which is people are more environmentally aware, and so how do we make visiting the region, how do we sort of interpret that for people, make it something that they don’t just come and get their picture in front of Old Faithful but they understand a little bit of what it’s going to take to actually preserve the park and preserve the bison herds and sort of take that back home with them.

There’s all these little communities surrounding the two parks that are all struggling with some of the same issues – fluctuations in the seasonal economy, challenges of sort of extreme geography and weather, some relative isolation. They’re all dealing with the same issues and they could learn from each other, instead of trying to go it alone. So one of the things YBP has done recently is help form a regional chamber network. So getting together the various Chambers of Commerce in the region and have them start thinking about what’s the kind of research and studies they could collaborate on that would help inform their desire to further economic development in their communities, but also how could they collaborate on, for example, heightening the geotourism profile of the entire region and by extension their communities.

There is a whole demographic of people who are moving to the region who do want access to public transportation or they would rather walk or ride their bike to work. So not everyone is looking to live out in the rural areas on several acres of land. Some people are, but not everyone
who’s coming for a recreation lifestyle. So some of those mixed-use or new urbanist – what we think of as characteristically “smart growth” developments – have been successful. And the other thing that I’ve also seen is having public events in public spaces that really fosters a sense of community. Teton Valley, ID has a “Music on Main” series that runs in the summer every Thursday night in the city park and they bring a band and it attracts thousands and thousands of people. People come from the surrounding area but it also is just a community gathering place and focal point and good for local businesses. And so I think part of placemaking isn’t just the built environment but the sort of community events you hold in the places you already have.

One of the really exciting things that has happened is that we’ve been, the area I live in has received one of the HUD Sustainable Communities grants and it’s allowing for a much greater level of conversation and planning between a four-county region that – there are communities within that four-county region that are very, very different culturally and now they’re coming together to talk about what are our shared natural resources and how can we plan, have some sort of base level communication and plan for how we preserve these resources and connect up our recreational trail ways. So I think more partnerships like that are going to help get us where we want to be in 10 or 15 years.