More of this, please

If I were pressed to state my favorite place in the world, coming right at the top of the list would be the Wawona Hotel, in Yosemite National Park. Not only is it inside Yosemite, but it is a historic hotel, originally built in 1879, and possessing all kinds of retro features as well as good restaurant, an excellent piano bar, great views etc. etc.

And in fact one of the best things about Yosemite is just how much of it is developed — there's the whole Yosemite Village in the Valley, hotels Ahwahnee and Yosemite Lodge at the Falls, the Redwoods and Yosemite West rentals, the wedding chapel, and even a US District Court with a full-time magistrate judge. (Note to the Eastern District: I'm available for the position when it opens!).

Which then leads to the inevitable next question: why wouldn't we want to do this everywhere? Obviously, you can't re-create the Wawona or the Ahwahnee, but the other sorts of amenities are easily replicable. The Yosemite Lodge is great, but no one would nominate it for eligbility on the National Register of Historic Places. And in any event, architects are pretty good at designing structures to reflect and fit into natural surroundings.

In recent years, we have seen the traditional environmentalist antipathy to development decline, as the environmental community has recognized that often development enhances environmental values. If it is done right — and that is a very big if — then development in national parks can do just that. Not only could it increase visitor numbers, but staying *in* the park means that a visitor does not have to drive so much, leading to lower VMT and localized air quality impacts.

A side benefit, of course, is that such development might augment a park's financial base. I don't want to make too much of this, because in my view national parks are public goods: simply because the Republican Party has decided to enthrall itself to Grover Norquist is no reason to abandon the idea of public provision. But in the Age of Dysfunction, it should not be overlooked.

Two objections immediately arise, one theoretical, one practical. First, one might say that undeveloped wilderness has its own intrinsic value regardless of other factors in favor of development. I think that that is right, but it does not apply here. National parks are not the same as wilderness: Congress created the former category in 1872 (and the National Park Service in 1916), and the latter with the Wilderness Act of 1964. They overlap, of

course: more than half of the National Park Service's land is designated as wilderness. But in a nation as large as ours, I am not persuaded that all national parks should be wilderness. There is room both for wilderness and for more intense uses of public open space areas.

The second objection concerns the camel's nose under the tent. Oh yes, if development is done right, then it could be good, but the whole point is that once you let for-profit entities in, then it creates a political ratchet effect: the concession creates profit for the private entity, which allows it to influence the governmental decisionmaker, leading to abuse and more profit, leading to more lobbying, and so on. This is true enough, but in my view vastly overstated: given the state of American plutocracy, for-profit entites don't need a park concession to corrupt the government. And while we should not let the perfect become the enemy of the good, we should also not let undue pessimism prevent exploration of potentially good ideas.

Not too far from Yosemite is King's Canyon National Park, which is also spectacular. But people visit there far less frequently. I think that a lot of that has to do with amenities. We need to re-examine some of our assumptions about what those amenities can and should be.