



Vail's trees – An environmental asset or looming fire hazard?

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

VHA Report Part 2 – Vail's Racing to Where?

October 22, 2018

Transparency: The TOV has taken a significant step forward to improve the public's awareness of how it operates. [Channel 5 Public Access Television](#) is recording, airing, and archiving the public hearings and proceedings conducted by the (DRB) Design Review Board and the PEC (Planning and environmental commission). The proceedings of the Vail Town Council public meetings are similarly documented. The VHA applauds this progressive step toward improving its transparency. The Homeowners Association has advocated for coverage of all meetings of the Town's committees, boards and commissions and that the meeting of all Town appointed groups be required to meet in Town Hall and their meeting document electronically. These groups include the Vail Housing Authority, Transportation Committee, and Commission on Special Event, Vail Local Marketing District Advisory Board (VLMDAB) and the Vail Economic Development Council.

The time may be approaching when the Town Council may want to establish public safety citizen advisory committees to oversee community impact issues regarding the function of the police and fire department. The purpose of the committees is to interface between other boards and committees tasked with providing for the operation and management of Design Review, Housing, Planning, Environmental Sustainability, Economic Development, transportation and public works.

Fear Mongering - Trees and Wildfire Landscape Requirements. There is an ongoing dispute within the Town Administration regarding which department should have the final say in determining and enforcing landscape standards for the community. The Fire Department is seeking to exert its dominance over the long established review function of the Design Review Board which is under the purview of the Department of Community Development.

The Fire Department argues that it should have the final say because public safety (life safety) trumps environmental sustainability standards. The nature of the turf battle is between reducing fire danger closer to zero or to recognize that there are risks associated to living within a forested area. Vail has been living with these issues since its beginning.

The Town Council, in 1974, adopted the Vail Plan which was a master landscaping plan for the community. It sets out environmental sustainability principles that called for the replanting of nature landscape in conjunction with development and civic improvement projects. Since that time, by following these principles, Vail has become a forested community. Those neighborhoods and developments with mature trees comply with the Town's beautification and environmental standards.

The fire department would have community property owners remove native vegetation and replace it with plant species and landscape materials that are more fire proof. The Fire Department version of fireproofing can be seen in the new buildings that have been built along the Interstate. The gaps in trees, as seen from the Interstate, are because recently built buildings are no longer required to heavily landscape a buffer area, required by zoning, to contain intensive plantings of native trees and vegetation between a building and the interstate.

The purpose of the standard is twofold. One is to bring scale to large buildings by masking their urban volume behind a screen of trees and native vegetation. It is reported that the Design Review Board (whose members are construction and design professionals) are lessening or minimally comply with these landscape guidelines, master planning principles and zoning standards.

Design professions have a tendency to reduce the material & labor cost for fellow developers. The gaps in trees along the interstate are proof of the intent of their actions. This DRB practice should cease. The existing environmental sustainability standard should continue to be followed.

The second is environmental. Vail would be a much different place without its trees. The Fire Department would like many of these trees removed. It is known science that trees and plants remove noxious chemicals such as carbon dioxide from the air and replace it with oxygen. Trees contribute to the health of wetlands that cleanse the polluted waters that are now flowing into Gore Creek. A fully wildfire protected Vail would look and feel much different than today.

The Fire Department should continue to do the heavy lifting of annually expanding the community's perimeter firebreaks, and surgically thinning out dead trees and brush. They should continue to advocate for better and safer guidelines, but the final say should remain with the community's highly trained landscape design professionals. Public safety should never be sold as an all or nothing outcome.



The results of the 1974 Vail Plan saying to plant intensive landscape, visual/noise buffers, with trees and native landscape along I70.



Is this the sterile results from the Fire Department Wildfire Landscape regulations or an inattentive DRB?

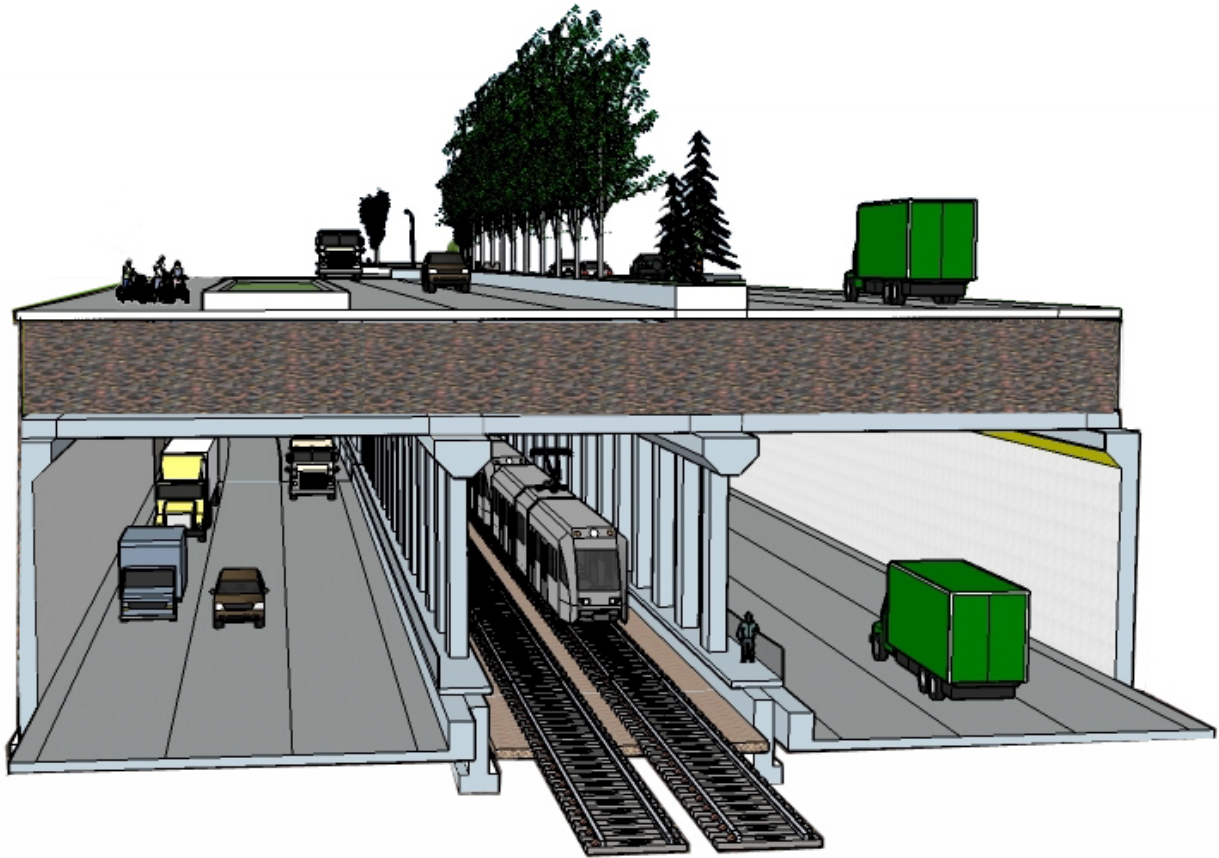
The Department of Community Development, the Town agency that administers the Design Review Board which recommends and enforces Vail's design guidelines, need to recommend an upgrade to the landscaping standards that include plant and tree specimens that are reflective of the native habitat. Perhaps it should do so under the advice of a citizen advisory committee.

The Fire Department is pressuring for much more stringent controls over the type and location of landscaping that complies with its version of wildfire safety standards. These standards, being used provisionally by the DRB, are beginning to show their consequences on the Vail town scape. The wildfire standards are yielding a barren appearing landscape. The intensive reforestation by planting groves of trees, the standard for the past 50 years, since the adoption of the Vail Plan in 1974, is being ignored.

The wildfire standard has created a sterile no man's land on new development along the interstate which now contains a few regimented trees with little or no attempt at replicating native landscape. Removed is the texture added by ground cover and bushes. Vail has always sought to soften the urban appearance of buildings by nestling them among native appearing landscape: trees, particularly aspen, cottonwoods and other species not as susceptible to wildfire. Vail without its native and manmade forests would not be the alpine experience we know today, far from it.

There are risks living in the forest. There is no fool proof way to insure 100% prevention of wildfire. The ecological and sensual beauty that trees, native flora and fauna bring to Vail's quality of life far outweigh the risk of living among them and with the creatures that live in them. Fire Department administrators should be less concerned about who has the final authority to set standards and focus more upon providing guidelines consistent with Vail's long established environmentally sensitive landscape design principles.

CDOT/TOV Partnership could consider Burying I-70: The newly announced I70 CDOT/TOV partnership is a gambit to get local voters to buy into a statewide transportation tax initiative on the November ballot. Also, it is a question if the partnership will survive the changes in perspective that will accompany a new incoming gubernatorial administration. Typically, there are major changes in the senior echelon of CDOT leadership.



Sig Bjornson, a Vail architect, has devised a visionary plan that has merit; he should be given the opportunity to be heard by the Vail Town Council, CDOT and the public at large. His plan is to minimize excavation, construct a tube tunnel containing eight lanes accommodating bi-direction multi-modal thru traffic. The existing North and South Frontage Roads are to be relocated above the tube tunnel. The design is capable of being modified to handle rapidly advancing transcontinental transportation technology.

The cut & cover approach for Vail does not benefit the entire community, as far as noise reduction, which is one of its primary purposes. The construction disruption would be mind boggling. The [bypass tunnel under Vail Mountain between the Vail Pass summit and Dowd junction](#) is the only approach that benefits the entire community. The Vail Homeowners encouraged consideration of the [Sig Bjornson cut & cover concept in 2016](#) ; the Vail Mountain Tunnel beginning in 2005, Frontage Road Parking, Public Safety are all transportation related issues that VHA has been at the forefront of advocacy.

It is interesting that the cut & cover concept has even made it onto the "further discussion" project list. It will likely remain there indefinitely. The evolution, in the not too distant future, of new transportation/communication technologies could radically alter the how, why and way people move around.

VHA [Membership:](#)

[© Copyright 2018](#)

Post Office Box 238 Vail, Colorado 81658

Telephone: (970) 827-5680 E-mail: vha@vail.net Web Site: www.vailhomeowners.com

Community Links:

Town of Vail Meeting agendas and materials can be accessed prior to meeting day on the Town of Vail website www.vailgov.com. All town council meetings will be streamed live by High Five Access Media and available for public viewing as the meeting is happening. The meeting videos are also posted to High Five Access Media website the week following meeting day, www.highfivemedia.org.
