

Joe McHugh - Where Do We Go From Here?

Response to Vail Homeowners Association Request for Comment:

1. Concerning the “Quality of the Vail Experience and Congestion:

I served for several years as one of two “second home owner” representatives on the Vail Economic Advisory Council which consisted of representatives from the lodging, retail and restaurant businesses in Vail. The Board was organized and originated by our Town of Vail Manager, Stan Zemler, with the objective of bringing together the various, occasionally warring, business factions to discuss common goals. The Council meets monthly.

The monthly agenda is prepared by the Town Manager’s office and consists largely of reports about the progress of major developments (new employee housing, Vail Resorts’ Ever Vail project, etc.), parking, discussions with CDOT about the frontage road and I-70, and monthly tax receipts in the various business categories with prior year comparisons, and various other current topics of general interest to the group. There are periodic presentations by representatives of the Vail Valley Medical Center, Bravo, the Vail Valley Foundation, and Eagle County Airport, the Vail Chamber of Commerce, the Vail Recreation District and an organization which tracks comparative business activity at all the competing ski areas in Colorado. Agenda discussions of general economic policy were very rare.

Although the second home owner representative category was included with the initial acknowledgement that those representatives might attend only half, or fewer, of the monthly meetings, a few years ago someone decided that one could not continue to serve on the Council unless they attended at least 75% of the meetings, which virtually eliminated any second home owner representation. Consequently, I no longer serve on that Council.

During my years of service on the Council, I found many of the meetings very interesting and informative in terms of the information provided on the various aspects of the Vail economy and ongoing projects. It was also interesting to hear the understandable conflicts within the various business group representatives generated by various Town of Vail policies, rules or regulations. Each agenda provided for a few minutes of general discussion and a Q&A opportunity, but only infrequently was participant input solicited about general economic policy and direction.

That said, it’s fair to say that the primary concern of the group, as a whole, was how to increase the volume of “heads in beds” with the consequent overflow benefits to restaurants and retailers, and how to diversify the economy, especially in terms of its seasonality, by increasing tourism in the Summer months to balance the business year. There is no doubt that the understandable objectives of the lodging, restaurant, and retailer business community, as well as the objectives of Vail Resorts, are to increase the volume – numbers of visitors in all seasons – by all means possible.

Consequently, there has been a growing volume of “events” throughout the winter and summer to drive attendance, all of which create traffic congestion and parking scarcity. Interestingly, many of the events do not put “heads in beds” in that they appeal to “day trippers” from the Front Range and other areas of the state. That might also be said of Vail Resorts’ Epic Pass – a roaring success for Vail Resorts in terms of selling ski passes and boosting skier /

snowboarder attendance. Several events sponsored by the Vail Recreation District – think soccer, volleyball, lacrosse, etc. – put heads in beds, but don't generate the greatest volume of restaurant and retail business. They do generate traffic and parking congestion.

On the parking front, the frontage roads are controlled and maintained by CDOT, not the Town of Vail, and CDOT limits the number of days each year that the frontage roads can be used for parking. That has led to discussions / negotiations between CDOT and the Town of Vail to transfer control of, and the maintenance responsibilities for, the frontage roads to the Town of Vail, for an as yet undetermined amount of money. Certainly, the annual maintenance costs are high and bound to increase over time, thereby adding to the Town's annual budget and need for tax revenue. One alternative is to build more parking levels onto the existing parking structures in the village and in Lions Head – a major capital investment! Recently expanded private parking availability, e.g. Solaris, has not provided any substantial parking relief.

There are two projects on the boards which might help traffic flow / congestion: 1) the proposed frontage road entrance to the new and expanded medical center, and 2) the proposed Simba Run underpass between the Vail village and West Vail roundabouts.

2. Concerning the Environment:

- a. I-70: CDOT has helped to reduce the noise pollution from the highway by experimenting – successfully - with quieter surface materials that generate reduced wheel whine and hum; that has probably gone largely un-noticed by the vast majority of the public. There have been two hugely expensive, long-term alternatives proposed to eliminate noise from I-70: 1) the so-called “cut and cover” alternative which would lower, bury and cover I-70 with more developable space, and 2) the even more expensive alternative to tunnel under Vail Mountain from East Vail to Dowd Junction and divert all “through traffic” through that tunnel, by-passing Vail entirely, with undetermined consequences for the Vail business community. Certainly, there would still be a Vail Exit for traffic travelling to Vail. I am told that CDOT already has preliminary plans for a Dowd Junction interchange with such a proposed tunnel.
- b. Gore Creek: The Town of Vail has recently proposed restrictions on home owner landscaping and other modifications to within ten feet of Gore Creek in order to promote the restoration of natural vegetation along the stream banks. Interestingly, the town exempted itself from this restriction where the town controls the stream banks. Also not covered, at present, are those properties whose deeds provide for ownership of the stream banks out to the center of the stream.

Having worked as a volunteer with the U.S Forest Service on a project to measure the extent of “cementation” of rocks in the Gore Creek streambed, I believe I can say with some certainty that the overwhelming threat to aquatic life in Gore Creek is highway traction sand which causes “cementation” of the rocks, thereby stifling the growth and development of insect life on which the fish depend for food. CDOT has made some belated efforts to impede the flow of sand into Gore Creek by creating a series of impoundments along the sides of I-70, and by vacuuming up the accumulated sand beneath the guardrails along I-70 to prevent it from flowing downhill into the creek. You would be stunned at the volume of sand that has accumulated along the sides of I-70 ready to wash down into the stream, and very difficult and costly to recover at this late stage.

There is, undoubtedly, some degree of chemical pollution in Gore Creek from two sources: 1) storm water run-off from paved areas where cars travel or are parked; and 2) non-

organic fertilizers used in landscape maintenance. The former is a real challenge. The latter could easily be banned by municipal and / or county (maybe State) mandate, and it's amazing to me that such regulations were not imposed years ago. The valley consists of heavily glaciated, porous soils and rocks through which polluted water and other fluids easily pass. There are signs along I-95 on the North shore of Long Island Sound in Connecticut which say "What Goes in the Ground Goes in the Sound". That concept is true in our valley as well and it is applicable to soils much farther back from the stream bank than ten feet – maybe 1,000 yards?

3. Governance / Inclusivity:

These are very difficult, sensitive questions to address – subject to wide variations in opinion. These issues are addressed on a continuing basis by the Vail Homeowners Association whose representatives attend the monthly meetings of the Vail Economic Advisory Board as observers. I believe there is a, perhaps understandable, tension between the Town of Vail and Vail Resorts which don't always share the same goals, but are forced to live together for their mutual benefit. Transparency should be a cornerstone of all government / citizen relationships, but is often lacking. I suspect that some appearances of a lack of transparency arise because of the "devil in the details". One example is the overwhelmingly popular vote to use the long-disputed funds raised from tax revenue for the controversial, and four times voted down, conference center for the re-development of the Vail golf course clubhouse and athletic fields in Ford Park. I was still on the Vail Economic Advisory Board when that was discussed at length and endorsed by the Board. It was a "no brainer". However, subsequent, more detailed plans for the clubhouse led to proposed relocation of one of the golf course greens near a residential area, to be replaced by paved parking, which led to litigation, allegations of misrepresentation, misunderstanding, etc., and I have no idea what was the ultimate resolution of those disputes. However, transparency and community inclusiveness were issues.

4. Community Accessibility:

It is much to the benefit of the Town of Vail and Vail Resorts to contribute to the financing of the Eagle County Airport and, perhaps, more importantly, to the subsidies of the various airlines which serve the airport. Subsidies are usually in the form of guaranteed revenue minimums which cost the contributors nothing if the minimums are achieved.

For financing purposes, the airport authorities recently introduced, perhaps long overdue, paid parking at the Eagle County Airport and chose to implement one of the most inconvenient and difficult to use paid parking systems I have ever encountered. In lieu of the more common control gates for entry and exit, using time and date stamped tickets with cash or credit card payment options, the system has no gates, two obscure computer terminals inside the terminal which require memory of and entry of your license plate number and the date and time of expected return and payment via a credit card. Of course, if you don't have your license plate number committed to memory, you must return to your car to get it. If the time of your return is delayed for any reason, I'm not sure whether your car is towed away or if the County just forgoes the extra revenue. This appears to be a paid parking system "on the cheap" and subject to misuse, abuse, or avoidance by going to the more distant free parking areas.

5. Winter Mountain Safety

This is an issue not raised by the VHOA but which, I believe, is a serious and growing threat to the future safe enjoyment of Vail Mountain, and which threatens to drive away both veteran Vail snowsports enthusiasts and others considering a Winter vacation in Vail. The growing incidence of injurious collisions and even more numerous, and frightening, "near misses" is a very serious problem on the mountain. During the past season, Vail Resorts made some efforts to address this problem by adding more "yellow jackets" and posting more warning signs and flags on some very heavily-used areas such as the Northwoods / Flapjack confluence above chair 11. I have heard that Vail Resorts is concerned about damaging the visitors' "Vail experience" by being too heavy-handed in controlling and disciplining dangerous and out-of-control skiers and snowboarders. I believe that there is an equally great danger of discouraging resident and visitor skiers and snowboarders who fear being injured by others. There is a wide-spread and erroneous belief among the older skiing population that snowboarders constitute the greatest danger to others on the mountain. My personal observation, supported by Colorado State statistics, is that dangerous and out-of-control skiers constitute an equal, or greater, threat to safety on the mountain. Last, but not least, ski bikes used to be confined to a night-time activity at the top of Lionshead. The allowed presence of ski bikes on all the slopes of Vail has increased the danger quotient. One can be certain that virtually anyone riding a ski bike has no clue whatsoever as to what they are doing or how to control themselves.

Sadly, although I am a significant taxpayer in Vail, I can't vote in the local elections, but these are topics worthy of discussion. Hope these observations are helpful.

Joe McHugh
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