



Rendering of Residences at Main Vail, will there be more like this?

Letters to Vail

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION, INC.

Affordable Housing Issues

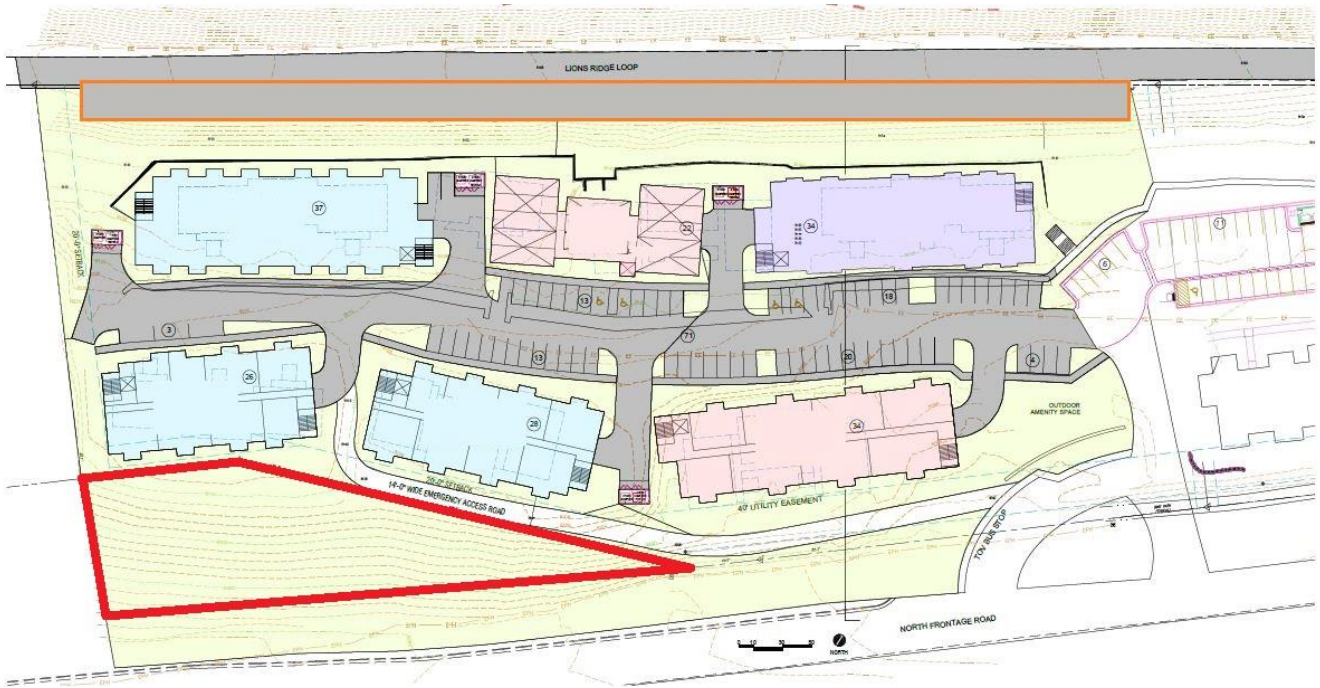
Will the Design of Timber Ridge II and West Middle Creek Be More of the Same?

**Can Vail Build its Way Out of its Worker Crisis?
Should There Be a Regional Housing Authority?**

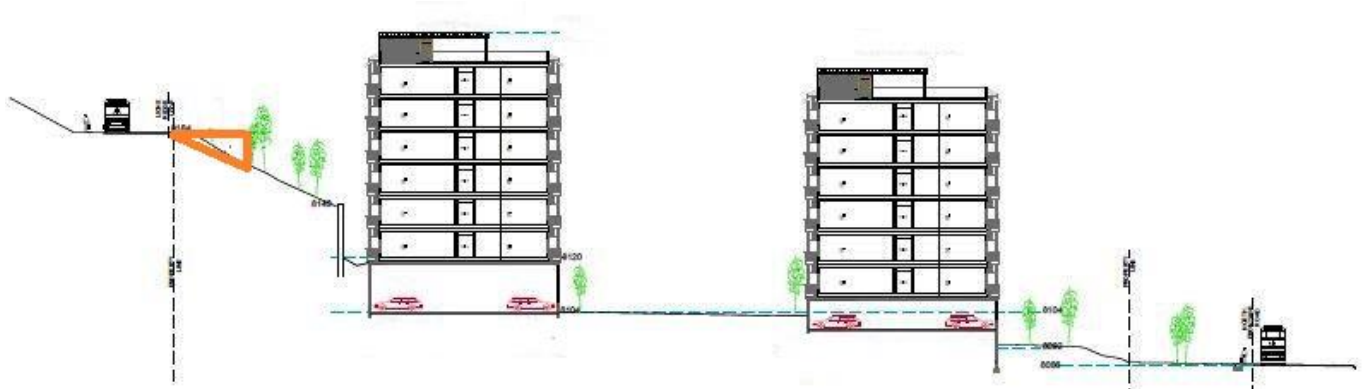
March 2, 2023

With affordable housing the number one concern in Vail Valley, the Vail Town Council is steadily moving forward with planning for two major workforce housing projects, the second phase of the re-development of Timber Ridge and West Middle Creek. While the VHA supports these projects, it does not support building more big-box, design-barren apartment buildings that will create additional architectural deserts along I-70. Those kinds of buildings abound in cities across the country. Vail should be able to do better. There is no reason why these projects cannot be designed in a way that will promote Vail values and ascetics and be consistent with what would be expected from a world-class resort.

Timber Ridge. Timber Ridge II will be the first of two projects, and the Town plans to construct seven buildings. The rendering below only shows six buildings. The seventh is planned for the area outlined in red which is currently owned by CDOT but which is anticipated to be acquired by the Town. This will be a massive project that will dominate the area. To put this project in perspective, it is more than four times the size of the Residences at Main Vail and one story higher (6 at Timber Ridge versus 5 at the Residences at Main Vail).



Timber Ridge II plan. Area outline in red is CDOT property that is proposed to be added and will have a seventh building.



All but one of the Timber Ridge II buildings to be 6 stories with parking underneath and on surface lots.

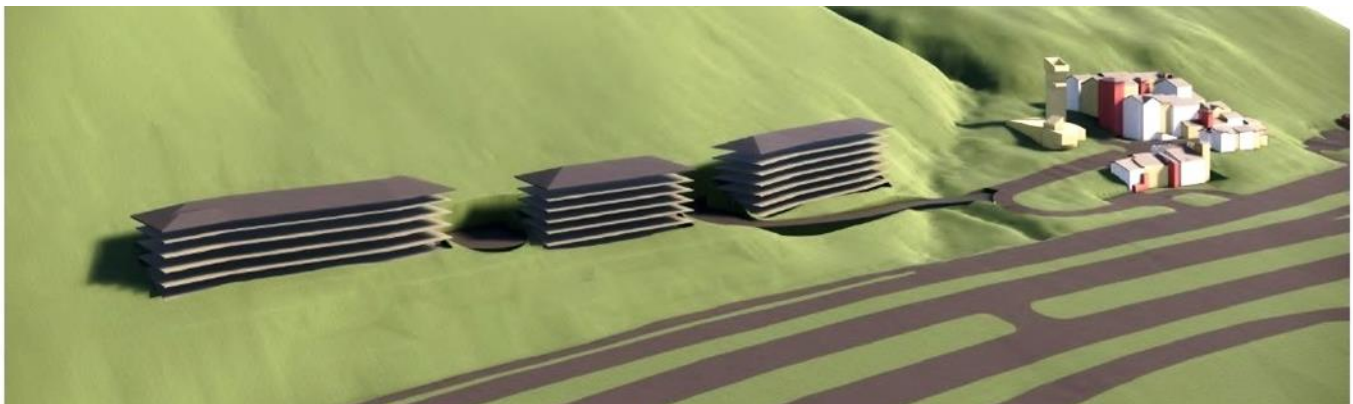
Originally, Timber Ridge II was planned to have 200 units which would have doubled its size from the current 96 units that are on the site. However, as the project has advanced, it has grown from the original goal of 200 units to a planned 316 units, more than three times the current number of units. In just six months, the estimated price tag has grown from \$100 million to \$148 million and that does not include the seventh building slated for the CDOT site which will push the total cost north of \$175 million. All but one of the buildings are slated for a flat roof, making those buildings even more box-like.

This project is to be a public/private partnership with Triumph Development, the developer of the Residences at Main Vail which is currently under construction at the entrance to Vail. In light of what happened with the design of the Residences at Main Vail, there is little reason to hope that the Timber Ridge design will be architecturally acceptable.



Timber Ridge II site, outlined in orange. CDOT site in red.

West Middle Creek. The West Middle Creek project is slated to go just west of the current Middle Creek Apartments. The site was originally zoned as open space, but portions have been rezoned to allow for housing development. The site is challenging in that most of it is at a 40%+ slope which will require extensive site improvements and for the buildings to be tucked closer to Frontage Road than is shown in the rendering below.



West Middle Creek Site, above, with Middle Creek Apartments far right. Development concept contained in TOV analysis.

Plans for the West Middle Creek site are not as far advanced as Timber Ridge, but current plans are for 178 units in three buildings of either five or six stories. That would be almost two and a half times larger than the Residences at Main Vail. At a conceptual level, the indication is that the three buildings could be similar to what is being constructed at the Residences at Main Vail. The Town is currently completing site feasibility studies.



West Middle Creek Site view west to Sonnenalp's Solar Vail, left center.

Time To Get It Right. As massively prominent developments bordering Vail on the north side of I-70, these two projects will have a major impact on the architectural character of the community. When the adjacent Middle Creek Apartments went up in the mid-2000s—the first large scale housing project opposite the town center—the then Town Council ensured that it was built to blend into the surrounding natural environment with step-up elevations to match its hillside location and with diverse elevations and offset facades to minimize its impact. When completed, it appeared as a European mountainside village completely in keeping with Vail's Bavarian architectural emphasis.



After intense negotiations Middle Creek Apartments conformed to TOV Design Standards.

That was no accident. Vail was founded on the premise that it would be unique in beauty, good taste and design excellence. Those principles were so important that they were enshrined into the Town's Charter. As stated there, "Vail is unique in that it places greater emphasis on aesthetic, environmental, promotional and recreational concerns than are traditional in most municipal governments." The design aesthetics gave Vail a unique and compelling image, and it developed into an internationally recognized world-class resort. While that image has slipped in recent years, there is no lack of desire today to return Vail to the top of the list.

But then Vail strayed off course. Along came Solar Vail and the Residences at Main Vail. Solar Vail stands out as an architecturally devoid, big box that seems to have been plopped in place on the hill side. Even though Vail supplied a major part of the funding for that project, it did nothing to improve the design. And, there are no excuses for what happened with the design of the Residences at Main Vail, a building that is fully owned by the Town. It would have been easy to create an appropriate design; the model for that was sitting right next door. But what was proposed was another large, big-box apartment building that was devoid of any architectural thought.



Sonnenalp's Solar Vail located between the West Middle Creek Site and the Sandstone School.

Because of the outcry over the building's design, a few small changes were made but that was like putting lipstick on a pig; it was still a fundamentally flawed design. Indeed, the Town's Design Review Board refused to accept the design, calling for a number of design improvements. But that decision was appealed by the Vail Local Housing Authority, creating the bizarre situation of the Town appealing its own approval process and objecting to the input of its appointed experts. When the matter came up for hearing, the Town's Housing Director was afforded unlimited time to condemn the action of the board; the board members were given only 3 minutes to defend their decision, and the then Town Council overruled the decision of its own board to allow the project to go forward. As a result, the town will get another large-scale, big-box apartment building not unlike ones that can be found in other cities, one that is hardly in keeping with the character of a unique world-class resort or the concept of harmonization with the natural environment.



Residence at Main Vail, rendering on left, building under construction on right.

That such structures could be built is because housing advocates were successful in removing workforce housing zoning from the design criteria that applies to all other zoning in Vail. That allowed aesthetics to be pushed aside and for designs to be dictated by the desired number of units, rather than the normal design process of harmonizing

the buildings with their sites and the character of the community. And, it seems that Vail is marching down that same road again on these two new projects that could result in cookie-cutter, design barren buildings. Already, maximizing the number of units is the principal driver of the Timber Ridge II development, and it appears that the West Middle Creek project will be heading in the same direction. As far as aesthetics, it is like the Town's Housing departments are working at cross-purposes from Vail trying to maintain itself as a world-class resort.

There is nevertheless time to get this right. Design criteria for Timber Ridge II can still be changed, and the criteria for West Middle Creek has yet to be set. The Town Council still has the latitude to direct that architectural design and compatibility be given timely consideration. These projects can still be designed to minimize their impact and harmonize with the community, but so far, the Council has been silent as the Housing Director has regularly reported on the progress of the projects.

At Timber Ridge II, rather than use the CDOT property for yet another building, that property could be used to spread out the buildings. Buildings close to Frontage Road could be stepped down; elevations could be varied and enhanced exterior materials called for. A landscape architect could be brought on board to design berms and landscaping to hide the buildings and the surface parking. Instead of just a jumble of big-box buildings, Timber Ridge II could have the appearance of a village that is worthy of a world-class resort and present occupants with a better quality of life. While good and proper design might result in a lower number of units, these projects can add to rather than diminish the Vail community. But the time to act, especially for Timber Ridge II, is now. Any vacillation and we will get more of the same.

Will Building More Units Alone Solve Vail's Worker Crisis? Vail has approached its worker crisis as if building more housing will solve the problem when at the root of the crisis lie other causes that need to be addressed if the crisis is going to be solved. For years, to enjoy Vail's natural wonders, many workers were willing to accept less than living wages. Some businesses offset those wages by providing housing, but most did not, resulting in workers having to seek two and sometimes three jobs to be able to afford to live in Vail. At the same time, Vail adopted housing policies that led to an ever-decreasing stock of affordable housing. It did that in two ways.

First, while many homeowners had lock-off worker accommodations that helped lessen the housing shortage, Vail allowed businesses to "buy-out" of obligations to provide worker housing. And those "buy-outs" were so economically advantageous that, rather than provide employee housing, the businesses invariably simply elected to buy out of the obligation. As Vail expanded and the need for workers increased, the housing shortage became more acute.

Then beginning in 2016, the housing situation grew much worse, and Vail again contributed to that situation. That was when short term rentals (STRs) burst on the scene. The STR marketplace incentivized many homeowners to convert what had been worker housing into short term rentals. While many other mountain resort communities actively regulated STRs, imposing caps on the number of STRs allowed, zoning restrictions on where they could be located, land use limitations and substantial licensing fees, Vail took a "hands off," free-market approach, imposing only minimum requirements and only a \$150 fee. That shortsighted decision was devastating for employee housing as hundreds of former workforce housing units were converted into STRs.

After much fretting and delay, last year the Town revisited STR regulation, and the realtor class sprang into action to squelch any limitations on STRs. Instead of any meaningful limitations, the new regulations adopted by a divided Town Council require only the posting of a sign with certain information about the unit and new fees and fines. [As a result, today there are at least 1,000 STR units with almost 2,800 beds in properties which could have been long-term workforce housing.](#) That means Vail is playing catch-up to a workforce housing situation it facilitated with a long way to go just to get back to 2016 levels. But it's not too late to rethink STR regulation. Nor is it too late to rethink commercial buy-outs and make them at least market based, so that developers will not be incentivized to buy-out of housing obligations. To the extent that Vail does not do so, it is just adding to the housing problem.

Beyond that, a new worker attitude is emerging. Worker attitudes were already changing before the pandemic, but the economic shutdown brought on by the pandemic has resulted in a new employee norm. Gone are the days when employees are willing to work multiple jobs at less than living wages to score some free skiing. In the last two years, to fill and maintain staffs, businesses have been scrambling to raise wages. That is a step in the right direction, but businesses would be well advised to reassess on a global level how workers are paid and treated. The only way businesses are going to get steady workers in the long-term is to provide a working environment that is conducive to worker satisfaction.

Is It Time for a Regional Housing Authority? If it ever was, housing is no longer just a Vail issue. Other valley communities, the Eagle County school board, Eagle County itself and some businesses are taking action and launching projects to address affordable housing. But it is a patch-work of approaches that appear to be still mainly inward looking.

For years, Vail’s approach was parochial with no consideration of any down-valley solutions. More recently, Vail has recognized that it cannot solve its housing needs within its municipal limits and must look down-valley. But even then, the Vail focus has been on how to get more workers for Vail businesses, not on the fact that worker shortages are a valley-wide issue that needs valley-wide solutions.

Recently, there has been more valley-wide consultation on housing issues. That is a step in the right direction but is it not time to formalize that process? Rather than a series of patchwork efforts, more could be accomplished with a coordinated approach.

VHA provides clear and concise discussions of matters affecting the Vail community in the belief that an informed citizenry will be an engaged citizenry. Our intent is to promote more citizen involvement and community discussion of issues facing the Town. If this is an issue that concerns you, please make your views known to [town officials](#). By joining with VHA, as a member, paid-subscriber or reader you can add your voice to sustain what is good about our community and to shine a spotlight on important issues.

To receive VHA letters and reports as a Reader, Paid-Subscriber or Member.

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