



**Morning crowd at Gondola One February 12, 2022.**

# ***Letters to Vail***

**VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION**

**Is There Overcrowding on Vail Mountain?**

June 20, 2022

Vail Mountain is the economic engine that drives the TOV. In many ways, the TOV's success is tied to the success of Vail Mountain as a ski resort, and the success of the resort is directly impacted by whether there is persistent overcrowding on its slopes. And when there is overcrowding on the mountain, the impacts spill over to affect the town and the quality of life. For those reasons, the answer to the overcrowding question is fundamental to the Town's quest to become a sustainable community.

Vail Resorts says there is no overcrowding. Trust us it says, there is nothing to worry about—we don't have too many peak days—there is room for all the skiers and riders that show up. That message was most recently delivered by former VR CEO, Rob Katz.

It came when he was receiving an industry award, and he spoke about this past season. In his remarks, Katz decried what he claimed was a false narrative that ski resorts are overcrowded and that there are too many people on ski hills. Specifically, Katz stated that “actually [this past year] we didn't have that many people.... We didn't actually see peak days grow. In fact, they were lower.” [According to Katz, almost none of VR's resorts exceeded even one peak day for the entire season.](#) While Katz was talking about all of VR's resorts, he voiced no exceptions to this rosy picture. This was not a surprising assertion given VR's disastrous season; after all, a “circle-the-wagons” defensive posture is often the response to a bad situation.

It would be enlightening to know the true facts. We know VR has the information. It closely monitors everything on the mountain and could, with the literal push of a button, spit out the information. Yet, it steadfastly refuses to do so. [Even in 1995, when VR agreed to share information with the TOV on the number of skiers on the mountain, including points of access and egress, times of arrival and departure and numbers of destination and day skiers, it never did.](#) So, as a community, we have to rely on the next best evidence available, and all of that evidence points squarely to the conclusion that Vail Mountain is indeed overcrowded.

It starts with the anecdotal stories that abounded this past ski season of injuries, collisions and near-misses. Admittedly, this is not very scientific, but there was a major uptick in those stories. It seemed that everyone had either been personally involved or knew someone who had been involved in an injury, collision or near-miss. It was a regular topic at social gatherings and in other discussions. Many said that they were no longer going to ski on weekends because Vail had just become too dangerous.

Then there is the fact that for the 2021/2022 season, VR sold a record number of Epic passes (2.1 million) which was an almost 80% increase from the pre-pandemic 2019/2020 season. That was 750,000 additional skiers with VR passes. They had to go somewhere, and on many days, it seemed they all descended on Vail.



Frontage Road Parking February 5, 2022 – [View You Tube video clip \(skip ad\) by John LaConte – Vail Daily](#)

There is also the fact that overflow Frontage Road parking was necessary for a record 53 days this past season, during which a total of 15,145 cars were parked on Frontage Road. Further evidence of the overcrowding that many believed occurred.

And there is the fact that Vail Mountain has steady dropped in the *Skier Magazine* poll. While many factors go into those ratings, the on-mountain skiing experience—including overcrowding—plays a big role.

[There is also the fact that VR posted a net income for the fourth quarter \(ending April 30\) of \\$372.6 million which was a 32% increase over the previous year.](#) Investors were told that was attributed to “strong growth” after the holiday period. While that doesn’t necessarily prove that VR’s resorts were crowded, it is confirmatory of the general community conclusion that there were just too many skiers on the mountain on too many days.

If VR wants to claim that there is no overcrowding on Vail Mountain, it should put up the evidence. Provide the data and detail on daily skier visits. Provide Ski Patrol and Yellow Jacket data on the incidences of injuries, collisions and near-misses. And let the community see what is really happening on Vail Mountain.

Vail used to be the crown jewel of American skiing. That is no longer the case as Vail slides toward becoming just another average resort. That would undermine the TOV’s vision to be the “Premier International Resort Community.” Unfortunately, there is nothing to indicate that is not going to be the future state of Vail Mountain. As soon as the season was over, VR’s marketing machine swung into high gear. In the past two months it has been relentlessly pushing pass sales. [Last week, in her investors call,](#) Vail Resorts CEO Kirstin Lynch revealed that pass sales for the 2022-2023 season are up about 9% in units and 11% in sales dollars as compared to the same period of last year with the majority of the selling period for passes still to come. If those numbers hold, that would be an additional 200,000 passes over last year.

It may be time to, fundamentally, rethink the TOV’s relationship with VR and do so in a way that will address overcrowding. That relationship has deteriorated from one of mutual partnership to one of posturing disengagement. Reassessing that relationship could begin with addressing what is a “peak day.” That number for Vail Mountain is currently 19,900 skiers and riders. It was set decades ago, by VR and USFS without input from the TOV, at a time before China Bowl and Blue Sky Basin ski terrain were opened which raises the question of how realistic it really is. We don’t know how many times this past year that number was exceeded on Vail Mountain—that is something else that VR does not divulge—but, if that number was not exceeded this past year, the conditions that existed over much of the year on the mountain strongly suggest that it may be overly generous; 19,900 may be too many skiers on Vail Mountain on any given day. Given the experience of the past year, it might be well to revisit that number. Perhaps it is time for the TOV to ask the USFS to review that number.

It may also be time to tackle the perplexing issue of Frontage Road parking. Apart from the public safety issues that Frontage Road parking creates, the availability of unlimited free parking on Frontage Road directly contributes to overcrowding, both on the mountain and in the town. It would be a huge step forward to return Frontage Road parking to truly exceptional days when locals want to participate in town activities, such as the Fourth of July and Christmas festivities. To help manage visitor parking, I-70 roadside digital signboards could be utilized to inform the public about the availability of parking in Vail. One could be positioned in Summit County to give the info well in advance of visitors arriving in Vail. This technology already exists in all major airports. That way, as parking structures fill up, the signboards would convey the percentage or number of spaces still available, until no more were left. Therefore, Frontage Road parking could be eliminated, and visitors would not arrive in Vail expecting to find parking.

It is also past time for the TOV to press elected representatives to legislatively require VR to provide data for on-mountain activities, including injuries and collisions. This information is too important for it to remain hidden.

These actions, and others the TOV might take to create sustainability, will come at a cost. The lift tax has not been adjusted since originally imposed. Given VR's stance on issues affecting the town, it is more than equitable to increase that tax to pay for necessary improvements.

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VHA provides clear and concise discussions of matters affecting the Vail community in the belief that an informed citizenry will be an engaged citizenry. We intend to promote more citizen involvement and community discussions of issues facing the Town. If these are issues that concern you, please make your views known to [town officials](#). Public discussion of current issues by concerned citizens creates an environment to further community initiatives. We heartily encourage your input in shaping the road ahead.

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Join VHA as a Paid-Subscriber or Member. Contact:

[vailhomeownersassoc@gmail.com](mailto:vailhomeownersassoc@gmail.com)

Post Office Box 238 Vail, Colorado 81658

Telephone: (970) 331-2099 Email: [vha@vail.net](mailto:vha@vail.net) Website: [www.vailhomeowners.com](http://www.vailhomeowners.com)

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