

Letters to Vail

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

Sustainable Tourism

January 4, 2022

One thing that should have been learned from 2021 is that the current level of Vail tourism is no longer sustainable. Record levels of tourism are smothering the town. The mountain is crowded with skiers and riders and is becoming increasingly unsafe, resulting in Vail continuing to slide in skier approval ratings. The town is packed with visitors, and parking on frontage roads has already used up most of the agreed winter limit. In the summer, recreation trails are being overused and in danger of irreparable damage. Overcrowding is exacerbated because local businesses cannot find enough employees to service their customers, and restaurants are having to cut back hours. Employee shortages affect everything from snow cat drivers to bus drivers.

What had already been a growing migration to Vail and other Eagle County communities was kicked into high gear by the pandemic, resulting in rampant real estate speculation and soaring prices. At the same time, the unfettered ability to convert housing to short-term tourist rentals undermined the employee housing market to the extent that all the gains since 2017 have resulted in no net increase in available housing.

Successive Town Councils have avoided this growing problem, either ignoring it or electing to kick the can down the road. Business centric thinking suppressed any consideration other than how to get more heads in beds with no thought about the impact on the community's quality of life or what might be a realistic carrying capacity. Now the Town has launched a sustainability study, but the results are not due for a year, meaning that Vail will not begin to take comprehensive action any time soon, while other communities and competitors have stepped up to tackle sustainability head on and are working to reduce the negative consequences of tourism.

- [Hawaii Is Rethinking Tourism. A more sustainable, less colonial experience awaits.](#)
- [Aspen Moratorium Short Term Rental and residential development Permit](#)
- [Aspen Skiing Co. 2021 Sustainability Report makes case for political activism](#)
- [Epic crowds are colliding with epic labor shortages at ski areas](#)

Too often studies serve to just kick problems further down the road. And too often, study results are like Christmas trees where every interest insists that solutions to their pet issues be included. A serious effort to tackle sustainability will require hard choices to create a comprehensive plan to balance tourism with the quality of life. Everything should be on the table, from marketing to special events to parking and housing, including short-term rentals. Is Vail to continue to be a special place that values the environment and quality of life more than traditional governments? If so, how is that to be accomplished?

Its not that Vail doesn't have tools to deal with its problems. Overcrowding can be addressed with marketing and special event changes. Parking on frontage roads can be eliminated to limit daily traffic. A master plan for housing, something Vail has never had, could provide guidance for housing policies. A moratorium on further short-term rentals could be imposed while those policies were being prepared. Vail Resorts could be requested

to limit skiers and riders on the mountain, with the potential for raising the lift tax and taking other measures if Vail has to go it alone. A master plan for the environment, something else the Town of Vail has never had, could lead to protection of the environment with the potential for reservation systems and limited access as a necessary means to accomplish that goal.

Town businesses should be encouraged to have a sustainability coordinator with the responsibility to develop ways to balance tourism and quality of life. Tourist promotions should have a sustainability focus. And tourists should be messaged with the importance of sustainability.

These are complex issues. It will require dedicated leadership from the Town Council to find acceptable solutions. But one other thing is also clear—no longer can the can be kicked down the road. Without real solutions, Vail will continue to slide toward becoming just another ordinary community with increasingly insurmountable problems.

VHA hopes these letters will promote more citizen involvement and community discussions of issues facing the Town. Public discussion of current issues by concerned citizens creates an environment to further our community initiatives. We heartily encourage your input and, from time to time, will publish commentary from community members. It is time we talk to each other about the next steps along our road ahead.

We hope you will follow or participate in this ongoing VHA discussion. You are welcome to join-in as a paid-subscriber or member. Contact: vailhomeownersassoc@gmail.com

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