



Storm Clouds Over Vail's Exuberance

Vail Homeowners Association Newsletter

News, Analysis, and Commentary for Vail Homeowners

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Gore Creek Now and in the Future

Gore Creek Pollution: Gore Creek runs through the length and heart of Vail. It is the community's main water way. Colorado water quality authorities designated, in late 2012,

that the entire stream was polluted. The designation requires that a plan be adopted and implemented that brings the stream into compliance with water quality standards. The basis for the State's action was further confirmed through a [consultant study](#) sponsored by local jurisdictions, which more precisely documented the extent of the pollution. The primary cause of the contamination is urban runoff that has resulted from Vail's steady increase in urbanization since its inception. ([Review full report.](#))

Restoring the Pride of the Community: Gore Creek, in the public's perception, has remained a relatively healthy stream and a source of pride since the community's founding 50 years ago. Then the [State changed their evaluation criteria](#); adopting in 2011 a new methodology that uses unhealthy characteristics in the aquatic macro-invertebrates (bugs) population as a factor to determine if a stream is polluted or not. The State found that [heightened levels of certain contaminants](#) have caused macro-invertebrates in Gore Creek, on which fish populations depend, to drop below healthy levels.

The Decline of Road Sand and the Rise of Chemical De-icer: The new circumstance comes after local authorities have worked for the past two decades to contain the migration of road sand into Gore Creek resulting from the sanding during the winter of Interstate 70 over Vail Pass. Road sand fills in the stream bed smothering macro-invertebrates and causing bank erosion, widening the stream bed and flood zone. The sand is most prevalent in the upper reaches of Gore Creek in East Vail, which also has the greatest degree of impairment to the aquatic bug population. Road sand may prove to be no less a threat than the chemical de-icer that has been more frequently deployed on I-70 in recent years as a substitute to sand.

Pavement a Major Factor: The study concludes that a significant amount of land has become covered by pavement and buildings, otherwise known as impermeable surfaces. Pavement is a major contributing collector that concentrates and transports urban runoff that contains chemical pollutants. A significant portion of the paved surfaces are publicly owned streets and highways. Vail will be further impacted by urbanization through government plans to expand the amount of pavement through widening roadways and contemplated expansions to Interstate 70.

Beginning the Restoration Process: The Town of Vail is beginning the process of adopting a variety of strategies to reduce the contamination. Some of these strategies could disproportionately place a heavier burden on property owners who own high value stream frontage. Most privately owned land in East and West Vail fronts directly on Gore Creek, whereas in main Vail, there are Town owned green belts along Gore Creek. Water quality planners are recommending increasing building setbacks from streams, establishing regulations for "no-mow" zones, controls over fertilizing and the restoring of native stream

side vegetation. New development might find that it has to comply with much more stringent runoff controls and treatment costs.

No Simple Solutions: There are no simple solutions to removing these chemical pollutants. The Town's current approach to treatment of urban drainage is spotty. At a limited number of locations, urban runoff is strained through sand filters or slowly through the soil in retention ponds. Both of these methods are not effective in removing dissolved chemical contaminants. That would require advanced treatment, which could become costly. Who should bear the cost of paying for advanced treatment is an important question for both land owners and taxpayers.

No One Source is the Problem: According to the authors of the government report, there is no one specific source for the contamination. It is a cocktail of substances that they say accompanies increasing urbanization. There are, however, candidates that lead the list of likely sources. One of the most prevalent is the chemical components of urban runoff that come from paved surfaces such as streets, interstate highways and parking lots. A high percentage of the paved surfaces that drain urban runoff into Gore Creek are both publicly owned and regulated by the town, state or federal governments. How much of the cleanup costs will be borne by tax dollars from each of these entities is an important matter needing further public discussion.

Town in Difficult Position: The Town of Vail is in a difficult position. Government officials are being challenged to find approaches that balance environmental preservation needs with economic development desires. There are strong competing interests on either side of the issues competing for the allocation of public funds. The most immediate example is the installation of a drainage system and artificial turf on the Ford Park athletic fields.

Some tourism interests want to open the athletic fields for play on Ford Park earlier in the spring, so that more out-of-town sports teams and their families will book their stay in Vail. The [Town exceeded its Ford Park budget by \\$1.5 million](#) partially due to the addition of an extensive drainage system to dry out the athletic fields. Included in the proposal is the installation of rubber based artificial turf on portions of fields; again, so that play can begin earlier in the spring. This, however, may lead to unintended consequences; a [State of Connecticut water quality study](#) reports that rubber based artificial turf is the source of ground water pollutants producing contaminants similar to those identified in the Gore Creek water quality study as needing to be controlled and removed.

Contaminants from Ford Park Facilities and Athletic Fields (above) that recently flowed untreated into Gore Creek should not be allowed. *Fisherman Photo*

Test Before Acting: A conscientious fisherman recently provided photographs to the Town Council, indicating visual symptoms of possible pollution at a drain outlet that flows into Gore Creek from the newly installed drainage system for the athletic field. Perhaps, as a precaution, before installing the artificial turf, the Town should first test to see if there has been ground water contamination created at a nearby installation of a similar artificial turf technology which has been in place for several years.

Avoiding Over Regulation: Water quality planners are calling for the implementation of comprehensive regulations and do not want to wait for more detailed studies. Additional studies and increased inspection could be helpful in targeting specific locations where contaminants are at their highest concentration, such as the drainage outlets from street and parking lot runoff, which in most instances flow directly into Gore Creek. The result of these studies could be used to determine clean-up costs and priorities for improvement.

Low Cost Solutions Should be First Step: There are low cost solutions that could be immediately implemented. Increased enforcement could improve erosion controls on construction sites and inappropriate dumping into streams of contaminated snow removed from private parking lots.

Pushing parking lot snow into Gore Creek and streams should be stopped.

Accuracy and Enforcement Should Define Solutions: Accurate mapping (yet to be done), frequent inspection and testing of urban runoff at locations that flow directly into Gore Creek, particularly during spring runoff and storm events, could help isolate problem areas. The Town, in the short-term, may need to redeploy and perhaps increase its code enforcement personnel.

Urban runoff from storm drain flowing into Gore Creek should be mapped, tested and monitored. *Fisherman photo*

Anomalies and Unforeseen Outcomes: The State has provided the local water and sewer district with a [grant to upgrade its wastewater treatment plants](#), with the intention of bringing plant effluent into compliance with new regulations. The upgrade may not be without unforeseen outcomes, as the water quality data shows macro-invertebrate populations are healthier below than above the West Lionshead plant. This anomaly remains unexplained, but some experts informally attribute it to nutrients from the plant's effluent, which is one of the pollution contaminants scheduled for treatment. The water quality study seems to indicate that there is a balancing of certain levels of the appropriate nutrients that are beneficial to aquatic habitat. Also, this section of Gore Creek below the plant is designated as a gold metal trout stream, which makes the balancing of treatment methods all the more important.

Effectiveness of Waste Water Treatment System a Key Factor: A more effective waste water treatment system could be a very useful tool in reducing levels of urban runoff. However, it is unlikely that the capacity of the current waste water system can treat pulses of a high volume of contaminated storm and snow runoff. On the other hand, it could be useful for lesser volumes.

According to Town Officials, some parking structures already drain directly into the sewer system, which could be helpful in reducing contamination in the winter from road ice on cars and trucks. Snow dumps and the like, where the outflow can be regulated, could also be diverted to waste water treatment plants.

Expanding Treatment to Urban Runoff: Town officials were in the process of investigating methods to reduce urban runoff from Interstate 70 as part of proposed changes and landscape improvements to the East Vail Interchange. This project and other

improvements that could have included upgrades to drainage systems associated with the community's frontage roads and interstate highway may be put on hold for the long-term. There is a more pressing need to make repairs to extensively damaged roads from recent catastrophic flooding on the Front Range.

The Community Will Rise to the Challenge: Vail, to protect its tourism, cleaned up its air pollution in the early 1980's by regulating wood burning stoves and fireplaces. Now, after 50 years of keeping water pollution at bay, it must take the necessary steps to clean up its waterways. The challenge, however, may not be as easy as regulating wood burning fireplaces; the problem may prove to be far more intransigent and costly to solve.

Solutions Require Collaboration: Perhaps the solutions lay with a collaborative relationship between federal, state and local governments, including the cumulative actions of individual property owners who recognize they must change their way of coexisting with Gore Creek. In the best of all worlds, in finding solutions to the water quality issue, other forms of environmental contaminants could be tackled along the way, like pollution from Interstate 70 highway noise, an issue that still ranks high on the community's long-standing environmental agenda for solutions.

Gore Creek - Fish First.

Candidate Election Forum

Town of Vail 2013 Town Council Election VHA Candidate Election Forum

The Vail Homeowners Association gives Vail Town Council candidates the opportunity to provide written answers "in their own words" to questions gathered from members of the community. Each candidates' answers are posted, in the order that they are received, for the public to view on the Association's website. Additional election information is also posted.

Follow the Forum on the Vail Homeowners Association website:

www.vailhomeowners.com

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