

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION



Vail Town Council Chamber – Empty Seats Available

Visioning Vail – Governance Issues

September 11, 2015

Vail's municipal government may be about to enter a major transition. This fall's [Town Council election](#) could bring a new tone to City Hall and there could be significant organizational changes that may include some of the Town's senior executives. At the same time, the Town's vigorous rebound from the recession has set the stage for a potential reassessment of Vail's future. The outcome of this year's election will speak volumes about Vail's course in the coming years as well as to how inclusive and transparent the Town of Vail intends to become. Unfortunately, the way in which that election is going to be conducted—a short campaign period followed by an election with restrictive absentee-only mail balloting—is not a step in the right direction. As an [investigation by the Association](#) showed, full mail balloting greatly increases voter participation.

In recent years it has appeared to the Vail Homeowners Association that major cracks are occurring at several different junctures in what used to be a vibrant community that was devoted to making Vail the best that it could be. Part-time residents have never had the ability to engage in the town's local governance through the ballot box, but in recent years, it seems their voices have been increasingly disregarded or pushed aside creating an “us against them” gap in community relations. Vail seems to be losing sight of the fact that, in great part, it is those residents' property investments, taxes and philanthropy that gives the community value, uniqueness and authenticity.

The character of the community has also been changing as Vail has shifted from being a resort community towards being a retirement community. With all of its positives, the natural environment, cultural outlets and spirit, Vail's population has been “aging” as many turn towards Vail as an ideal place to retire. There are subtle but real differences between resort and retirement communities. These differences are just now beginning to become significant factors in the community's perception of itself and its future.

Vail's marketing however does not reflect these demographic shifts. The financial necessities of the recession caused the Town of Vail and Vail Resorts to merge their economic development agendas into a joint “mass-marketed” effort to increase tourism as they turned away from [“sustainable tourism”](#) as the centerpiece of the wellbeing of the community and economy. Mass-marketed, transactional branding began with Vail Resorts’ Epic Pass and now permeates Town Hall through its emphasis on special event promotions that attract mostly day visitors. This summer’s need for overflow on-street parking is just one indicator of how far that shift has gone. And, with the number of Epic passes now being sold, Vail could be one good snow year away from overcrowding on the mountain and all that brings in terms of skier safety and enjoyment.

Vail Resorts put even greater emphasis on mass marketing this past year when it dismantled its real estate development division. Since the beginning of Vail, the company’s development projects have been the impetus behind the steady expansion of Vail’s high-end market for “destination” guests and part-time residents. The “destination” market is key to the success of “sustainable” tourism, but that requires investment in infrastructure, like parking, that seems to be lagging or even lacking. The focus of an impersonalized bottom-line orientation seems counter to all that made Vail great and what attracted the high-end destination guests and part-time residents in the first place.

The Vision Question: There is also [the “vision” question](#), something that the Association has been attempting to address this past year. Major changes are taking place in Vail. The [Vail Valley Medical Center](#) is redeveloping its facilities which should bring needed infrastructure improvements although they are still years away because they have been pushed off to the end of the project. Other development projects, which could refresh the Town, are in the offing. Momentum is again growing for a civic/cultural center.



Dobson Arena – Should it be upgraded and returned to its original purpose as the community’s multipurpose event center?

If managed right, a civic/cultural center could propel Vail forward much like the Billion Dollar Renaissance of the 2000s, which saw major infrastructure improvements like heated streets and art in public places. But it needs to be a community asset decided upon by consensus, not just an amenity for the business community to “sell” to its customers. Community support is vital so that it does not become another divisive issue that could further tear at the cohesiveness of the community.

Because of past debacles, voters are skeptical and not particularly willing to devote community resources to build or maintain commercial projects. There could, however, be support for a true community asset that would increase cultural opportunities for all of the Vail community. For example, the Dobson Ice Arena was originally designed with an acoustically perfect ceiling in anticipation of use for a variety of entertainment events. Unfortunately, its functionality was limited by fire code requirements for ingress and egress, but that is a problem that could be remedied. Whether the coming Town leadership will have the vision to plan, advocate and convince the community that this is a worthwhile venture remains to be seen.

A community civic/cultural facility is just one of several major projects that should be on the Town’s agenda. Solving the parking crisis and cleaning up Gore Creek are two of the others. These are essential to promote sustainable tourism and should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Given the Town’s healthy financial situation, none of these

projects should be necessarily undertaken to the exclusion of others. The challenge to the Town's leadership is to find the way to move Vail forward in a way that enhances the community for the benefit of all.

During the Vail Renaissance many improvements were funded with the greatly increased revenues from the Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT) and Tax Increment Financing (TIF). Since then, perhaps wary of voter sentiment, the Town has used its ample cash reserves to fund projects or their cost overruns. *As a consequence, major spending has been taking place beyond the reach of voters.* This approach tends to create a credibility gap between Town Hall and those it governs. It also can create the cynical impression of conflict of interests, insider manipulation and political intimidation.

This does not need to happen. A [strong Ethics Code, as was recently enacted by Avon](#), could eliminate perceptions of insider playing. And the present elective process could be greatly improved. The current system favors insiders by compressing the election campaign into a few short weeks and suppressing voter participation by limiting mail balloting. This ensures that the voters cannot give too much scrutiny to the candidates, assess their performance, conflict of interest and accountability or have the opportunity to consider the agenda of the candidates. That could be changed by a few simple amendments to the elective process, increasing the time for the election and ensuring full access to mail balloting. Those changes would go a long way toward increasing confidence in government.



Eagle County Airport – Who should pay for more flight subsidies?

It seems likely that tax initiatives will be on the ballot in 2016. Eagle County is already looking at tax increases to fund schools and air passenger service into the Eagle Vail airport (EGE). And talk is starting about the likelihood of a need for tax funding for a civic/cultural center in Vail. This will undoubtedly spur vigorous debate about the role of government in funding such proposals. Flight subsidies, where the local destination pays the airline to provide service, are a good example. Currently the subsidies are funded by a loose confederation of some Eagle County business interests. Most resort related local businesses do not contribute to fund flights from new destinations, leaving their funding responsibilities to their local governments to make up the difference from tourism sales tax revenues. This has not yielded enough funding to more aggressively promote new flights and increase growth in the numbers of passengers. The question will become whether Eagle County property owners should foot the bill for an amenity that mainly supports the business community.

If there is a proposal for tax funding for a civic/cultural center, it will be incumbent on Vail leaders to bring all stakeholders into the discussion and reach consensus. There could well be agreement that such a proposal is in the best interest of the entire community, but to get to that point will require vision and leadership. Failing that would doom any such proposition.

Private philanthropy has played a major role in Vail's growth in the past. In the process, it has resulted in major non-government organizations (NGOs) being formed that help to build a sense of community and cohesiveness. But if the sense of community is being frayed by divisive issues and an "us against them" mentality, then it remains to be seen whether that commitment of support will wane. In addition, in recent years some of those NGOs have become increasingly dependent on local government for a greater share of their funding and, as that has occurred, representatives of the Town are appearing on the Board of Directors of many of those NGOs. Vail's leaders need to reassess whether this is a healthy relationship. Those NGOs are mainstays of the community's social services; it is they, not Town officials, who should determine whether they are fulfilling their charitable charter.

The challenge of keeping the community vibrant and intact by ensuring greater transparency in government, a balanced approach to community issues, solving Vail's infrastructure needs and shifting from "mass marketing" back to "sustainable" tourism, is in the hands of the voters and those who are politically engineering the coming transition in leadership. If there is to be a change in the trajectory of Town of Vail governance, it will likely come from the citizenry, who may well recognize a need for change before their public officials. Officials all too often consult their own surveys to conclude there is no need to alter course, but surveys can be worded to manipulate the desired outcome, particularly those conducted by partisan consultants.

If you share any of these concerns, get involved! Let your voice be heard. Help make Vail an inclusive community that brings out the best in all of us. Becoming a member of the Vail Homeowners Association is a great way to do that. But regardless of your decision on membership, we appreciate your interest in being engaged with our online Vail community.

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