

# VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION



Vail's Frontage Road Parking – Dangerous and Unsightly

## Visioning Vail - Vail's Parking Problem Intensifies Raising Questions of Transparency and How to Prioritize Public Investment

September 1, 2015

**Vail's Parking Problem Intensifies:** An investigation by the Vail Homeowners Association has revealed that Frontage Road parking increased exponentially this summer. [Figures obtained](#) from the Town by the Association show that already this summer, with the Labor Day weekend still to come, there have been 19 days of Frontage Road parking due to the parking structures being full. When added to the overflow parking during the winter ski season that means 2014/2015 is on the way to becoming the highest year of Frontage Road parking in the history of Vail. And with the Town of Vail and Vail Resorts revving up promotion of summers in Vail, it is a situation that will only grow worse. Aside from the unsightliness of overflow parking and its impact on the Vail "brand," the Association is concerned that we have passed the tipping point on public safety as visitors randomly have to cross heavily traveled roads, becoming a hazard to themselves and drivers.

For years it was generally understood that there was a 15 day seasonal limit on overflow parking—15 days in the winter and 15 days in the summer. Obviously this summer will end up significantly over that limit. But when the Association tried to pin down the source of that limitation, it uncovered a very complex and confusing situation.

Part of the difficulty in assessing the parking problem is that different departments of the Town's government report data in either different ways or use conflicting data sets. For example, the number of days of Frontage Rd parking for this past winter has been reported variously as 5 days and 14 days. It would seem that this is a known number since, until this year; CDOT has required Vail to report such days on a regular basis. But one thing is clear; the trend is toward more on-street parking especially in the summer months. Another difficulty in assessing the problem is understanding the responsibilities of the Town and CDOT, which have gone through some significant changes over the past year.

The Frontage Roads “belong” to the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT). In Vail’s early years the community’s founders banned all on-street parking. At some point, CDOT authorized limited Frontage Road parking and it has been in effect ever since. It was, however, limited to only overflow situations. In other words, the only times that Vail could allow parking on the Frontage Roads was when the parking structures were full. Hence the ritual on good snow days of drivers circling around waiting for the structures to fill up. For example, the 2014 parking lease allowed up to 30 days of overflow parking for the year and required Vail to report to CDOT each day that overflow parking occurred. There were however, no provisions in the lease for what would occur if the Town breached the lease by allowing more than 30 cumulative days (according to the Town’s data there were only 14 days of overflow parking that year). Apparently no one thought that exceeding the limit would ever occur.

The terms of the Town’s parking lease changed this year. Instead of a one year lease, the current lease is for three years, but it covers just the ski seasons (December 1 to May 1 of each year). The lease allows up to 30 days of parking but only during those periods. In other words, the Town did not have the “right” to allow parking on Frontage Roads this summer. In addition, the new lease removed the “overflow” requirement which gave Vail the right to permit parking on the Frontage Roads for any reason it chooses. The Town could permit parking on Frontage Roads on any days it chose just so long as there were not a cumulative number of days more than 30. Apparently, with large Town owned insurance policies to protect it, CDOT has washed its hands of Vail’s frontage road parking and public safety problem. These changes have occurred quietly, with minimal public disclosure and only came to light as a by-product of the Association’s investigation of this summer’s overflow parking frequency.

Town officials explained, in lieu of written reports, the Town officials now have “monthly meetings” with CDOT. It is unknown what the reasons are for this, since there is no oversight by CDOT and no consequences for going over the limit. It is a scenario that is reminiscent of the “meetings” that occur between Vail Resorts and the United States Forest Service when the mountain capacity is exceeded.

The Town officials also advised the Association that the permitted 30 days of parking have been “allocated” by the Town Council equally between the winter and summer, although, as noted, the Town had no right to do so since it presently has no summer parking rights. Reportedly, the Town is currently trying to obtain summer parking rights. Some see Vail’s overflow parking as a measure of success; others see it as an unpreparedness to deal with Vail’s needs. For some, the availability of 15 days of overflow parking in the winter and summer (assuming that Vail is successful in again obtaining summer parking rights) is a justification for not doing anything else. Some would even expand Frontage Road parking beyond current limits, maybe with no limits, as a way to solve Vail’s parking needs and eliminate the necessity of having to make any further investment in parking facilities. Unfortunately, the parking problem has grown worse, in part because economic growth initiatives have not been coupled with increases in the supply of structured off-street public parking. However, one thing does seem clear. The founders of Vail would have never countenanced what has happened.

If remedial steps are not taken, higher levels of tourism combined with public safety issues will come into even greater conflict once traffic diversions occur as part of the Simba Run Underpass project when construction begins in the spring of 2016. Traffic engineers expect to alternately close portions of the North and South Frontage roads during the two years it will take to complete the underpass project. Frontage road traffic could be compounded when I-70 is limited to one lane traffic through the spring while the underpass bridges are being constructed.

The Association believes that this is a situation that cries out for effective leadership before the situation gets worse and/or there is a terrible incident. Its not that there aren’t solutions available. An additional floor could be added to the Lionshead structure, both the Vail and Lionshead structures could be expanded in other ways. Redevelopment of the municipal site is still a possibility and there is the potential for down-valley remote parking west of Dowd Junction. All are expensive but the Association believes that Vail has reached the point where this “gorilla in the room” can no longer be ignored.

There is no way to know what the future will bring but the current situation exposes the need for greater transparency on the part of the Town officials. On-street parking should be monitored and reported in an easily understood format and the Town’s parking rights on the Frontage Roads should be readily available. Granted, any citizen that knew the questions to ask could have discovered what has happened, but that should not be the way government functions. Government works



best when the governed know what their representatives are doing. It is through knowledge that accountability and responsibility prevail. And it is through obscurity that problems arise and fester.

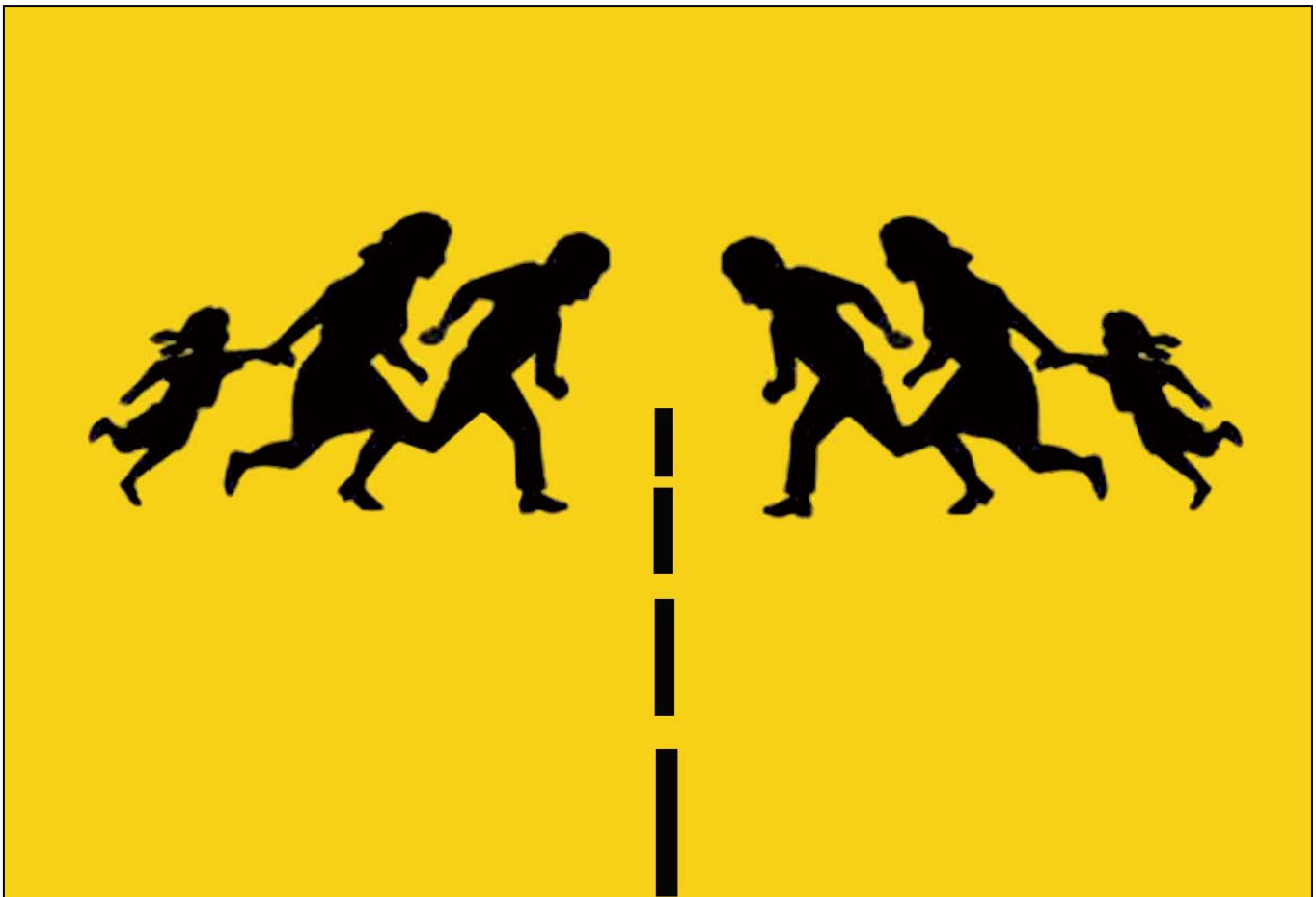
The intensifying parking problem has also exposed another potential problem and it is rooted in the type of tourism that has been occurring in Vail during recent years. Tourism is one of the most important industries in America and that is especially true for Vail. However, it is a two-sided coin providing many economic benefits, but it can also bring unwanted burdens in the form of congestion and degraded resources if the community's infrastructure is overloaded. If properly managed its impacts can be beneficial but it can be damaging if left uncontrolled.

Communities need to recognize the differences between mass-market tourism and what has been called "[sustainable tourism](#)." The former is all about "heads in beds," a high volume, high impact but often low yield approach. Think of the day visitor who drops in, spends little and quickly leaves. Sustainable tourism on the other hand is high quality, focusing on the community's natural and cultural assets. It is lower volume and lower impact but has a higher yield. Think of the destination visitor who stays to enjoy skiing, summer activities or one of Vail's cultural gems.

In recent years many have questioned whether it is time to refocus on the qualities that put Vail on the map in the first place. Whether it's protection of the natural environment, fostering high-quality cultural experiences, enhancing the ski experience or summer fun, reducing congestion would seem to demand priority. In today's marketplace the competition for tourist dollars is fierce. Clever marketing will get them once, but if they have less than an excellent experience repeat visitation will suffer.

If you are concerned about these issues or how your government is functioning, make your voice heard. It is, after all, your future. And remember, an election is coming.

**Pedestrians Accessing Frontage Road Parking - A Tragic Accident Waiting to Happen.**



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