



Katso Ranch Open Space purchased by the Town of Vail in the mid-1970.

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

What is Vail Planning?

June 21, 2017

The Town of Vail currently has three major planning initiatives underway—a review of Vail’s Open Lands Plan, a sustainability assessment and a master plan for West Vail. Together, the resulting product of these initiatives will shape the growth and development of Vail for decades to come. The VHA believes these are some of the most important initiatives that the Town has undertaken in recent times, and it urges all in the community to become informed about them and to speak out on matters of concern.

Vail’s Open Lands Plan. For 23 years Vail has protected its environment and enjoyed outstanding recreational activities, such as children’s playgrounds, parks, hiking trails and bike paths, through a comprehensive open spaces plan. That didn’t just happen. It was the product of a [well thought-out plan that was adopted by the Town in 1994](#). That plan is now under review for a long overdue update, and some see this as an opportunity to change priorities and/or convert some of Vail’s open space to tax-subsidized, “affordable” housing. These

issues are quickly coming to a head as the Town moves to adopt amendments to the Open Lands Plan by the end of this year.

The 1994 Open Lands Plan. The purpose of the original Open Lands Plan was to identify and develop strategies for protecting and acquiring key remaining natural open spaces in and around the town to protect Vail’s environment, and in certain cases, for use as parks, recreation activities, trails and other public uses. At the time, Vail already had substantial open space tracts, one of the largest being the Donovan Park property, and there was a strong public consensus that preserving open space was a major priority for the community.

The planning process examined over 350 parcels of land and recommended action to preserve, protect and acquire rights to 51 of those parcels. Included were parcels for neighborhood buffer zones, an amphitheater, athletic fields and improvements to Vail’s trail and bike path systems. The plan also contained a Land Ownership Adjustment Analysis that involved certain “boundary adjusting” trades with the U.S. Forest Service to establish a common Vail/NFS boundary around the town that would encircle Vail with open spaces. A six-year action plan laid out how to proceed. Funding to acquire and manage open space and recreation related activities was to come from the Real Estate Transfer Tax, a dedicated fund that had been established in 1979.

Permanent protection of open space lands was to be achieved by zoning that could not be converted to other uses without a public referendum. The next year Town voters, overwhelmingly, approved an amendment to the Town’s Charter, creating a “Designated Open Space” category, which requires voter approval for any disposition or other use of such land. A total of 57 parcels have now received DOS designation, including the Upper Bench of Donovan Park. While the Middle and Upper Benches of Donovan Park were acquired at the same time, through restricted RETT funds (restricted to open space and recreation uses), the Middle Bench was only designated as a “Town Park”; it never received DOS protection. Coincidentally, for some inexplicit reason, after 2005 the DOS process fell into disuse or maybe even worse; according to Town officials, after 2005 there have been no meetings of the DOS Trustees, and no land has been considered for, much less received, DOS designation. It raises the question of whether someone decided to quietly scuttle the program.

An interesting sidelight to the 1994 plan was that, at that time, Town planners estimated the Town was appropriately 90% built out, and there was room for only about 950 more dwelling units. By 2010—16 years later—over 1800 additional units had been built. Now, planners are envisioning ever increasing densities. In the Town’s current Transportation Plan, there is a projection of an additional 2,000 new residential units in Vail. With no available land to accommodate such exponential growth, the only way that scale of expansion could occur is through increased densities and more super-sized projects. This raises major sustainability issues.

Many of the goals and action items of the ’94 Plan have long since been accomplished, and an update of the Plan is long overdue. Kudos to the Town Council for launching this initiative. Hopefully, this will result in reactivation of the DOS process. But at the same time, diligence is called for so that the purpose of open space doesn’t get hijacked.

The New, Updated Plan. The new, updated plan, probably in the form of an amendment to the existing plan, is moving rapidly, with a draft plan due to be released in September and final approval slated before the end of the year. All of the action items from the ‘94 plan are being reviewed, and additional action items, to further environmental goals, will be considered.

The public comment part of the process is now nearing completion. Thus far, comments indicate that acquisition of lands for protection and preservation continues to be a top priority for the community: the Middle Bench of Donovan Park should receive DOS protection; there was a clear NO to using RETT funded town open space land for tax-subsidized housing, and there is a need to improve and extend Town recreation trails. There

are still, however, no specifics about what will be proposed, so the extent these community views will inform the final plan remains to be seen.

Converting Open Space Into Developable Land. Notwithstanding, the public opposition to using open space lands for tax-subsidized housing as [VHA first reported last year](#), there has been a movement afoot to convert open space into tax-subsidized housing, either by acquiring U.S. Forest Service lands or by using the Middle Bench of Donovan Park. The Town Council has already hired a consultant, specific parcels have been identified and site visits by the Council have taken place. All of this was done out of public view and knowledge until VHA reported it last November.

As VHA reported, it would be difficult and expensive to acquire USFS land for that purpose. But of greater concern, is the fact that the Middle Bench may now be on the Town's shopping list. Even though (or perhaps because) it is one of the largest open spaces within the Town, it is a prime target for conversion to tax-subsidized housing. This, notwithstanding the fact that it was purchased with restricted RETT funds, and in the early 1990's, a similar proposal was beaten back by neighborhood opposition.

Rumor has it that those plans may now have been nipped in the bud, but so far, there has been no official acknowledgement of either the original plan or its abandonment.

In the meantime, other efforts to convert open space to private use have been beaten back (at least for the time being). Just last year, there was a complicated land sale proposal that would have transferred covenant-protected open space land at Vail's front door to a private developer, the so-called Kindle House proposal. The proposal failed before the Town Council but that doesn't mean that it will not resurface. In short, protection of open space land is a continual process.

VHA Recommendations for the 2017 Open Lands Plan. As the 2017 Open Lands Update moves forward, VHA has five recommendations:

- (1) The DOS process should be reactivated, and parcels should once again be considered for DOS protection.
- (2) The Middle Bench of Donovan Park should be recommended for DOS protection.
- (3) Vail should acquire Tract E and D-1 in the Town core, parts of which were to be transferred in the Kindle House proposal, and once acquired, Tract E and D-1 should also be recommended for DOS protection (The Town has to acquire that property, because DOS designation can only be placed on Town-owned property).
- (4) Tract A, between Bald Mountain Road and I-70, which is currently designated as a Town Park (similar to the Donovan Park Middle Bench), should also be recommended for DOS protection.
- (5) Infrastructure consideration should be given to all open space uses so that Vail's infrastructure is not overwhelmed. For example, in connection with hiking trails there needs to be adequate parking provisions. Already there are significant parking issues at the Booth Falls and Gore Creek Campground hiking trails.

Vail's Sustainability Assessment. Vail is also undertaking a "Sustainability" assessment, again, kudos to the Town Council. Typically, such an assessment would measure a community's ability to endure in all aspects of its activities, including the quality of life of its citizens, the health of its economy and the balance between built and natural systems. Unfortunately, to date, it appears that Vail's sustainability assessment is going to be limited to just environmental considerations. Even then, however, this is an important step for the future of Vail.



Early June, Sunday afternoon in Vail's town center. One of the few quiet weekends remaining during summer.

But, as important as the environment is, Vail is much more. There are few places where quality of life, cultural riches and well-being, as well as natural beauty, have come together in such perfect balance.



Overflow parking for yet another record setting mass spectator event. Lionshead and Vail Village parking structures full.

In recent years, however, cracks have appeared in that veneer in the form of congestion, noise pollution, parking and public safety issues and housing needs. These all raise sustainability issues; such as, with the Town essentially built-out, is it sustainable to increase population by increasing density? At the same time, is it sustainable to continue to increase special events which are causing significant noise and parking issues, as well as congestion, as promoters continue to seek to add more events to an already crowded calendar? Sustainability should also consider on-mountain activities. With the expanded summer programs and the potential of an expansion at Golden Peak and more spectator events there, is Vail's carrying capacity being outstripped? And, is it sustainable for unsafe on-street Frontage Road parking to become the norm?

It is for those reasons that VHA urges that the Town undertake a full scale, comprehensive sustainability assessment, not one that is just limited to the environment. It should include a thoughtful examination of what is good about the community and assign value to adopting practices to maintaining those features so they are not overwhelmed by change or congestion. Once identified, those factors should drive government decisions and investments so that those values are maintained.

Vail is now largely built-out; future growth will necessarily require increased densities. A full scale assessment should, therefore, also include determination of the Town's "carrying capacity" so that its facilities will not be swamped. In the context of Vail's current problems, for Vail to be sustainable, it needs comprehensive, realistic plans for parking and housing. Public safety needs to be improved; Gore Creek and other environmental assets need to be protected and all of this must be matched to the Town's budget. From a tourism perspective, there needs to be balance between high impact, "heads in beds" and day visitor numbers, and the impact of those numbers on the community's natural and cultural assets.

A full-scale sustainability assessment could be the springboard for Vail's next 50 years. Failure to address these issues could have serious consequences.



2005 concept plan for West Vail shopping center, will it be even more ambitious today, more people more problems.

West Vail Master Plan. Kudos also to the Town Council for beginning, again, the long overdue West Vail Master Plan. West Vail is an area that is critical to Vail’s future. It contains substantial residential areas, and its commercial areas contain Vail’s only gas stations, grocery stores, hardware store and a host of other small businesses, all of which could benefit from a unified plan.

This is not the first time Vail has initiated master planning for the West Vail area. In 2005 Vail began master planning for the West Vail commercial area, between Buffer Creek Road and the Fire Station on the east and west and North Frontage Road and Chamonix Lane on the north and south. That [planning process developed a series of conceptual plans for that area](#), and decisions were beginning to be made when the potential development of Ever Vail and the 2007 Great Recession brought it to a halt. While the ‘05/’06 effort was restricted to just the commercial area, it remains to be seen what will be the scope of this new effort.

West Vail is, however, much more than just that commercial area. There are large residential areas on both sides of I-70 and large areas that face North Frontage Road to the east of Buffer Creek Road that cry out for unified planning. Already a number of residential areas-- Matterhorn Circle/Alpine Drive, Intermountain and

other multi-family properties—are being eyed for redevelopment. There has also been talk of adding a ski lift out of the Matterhorn area, which would raise a host of parking and congestion issues.

VHA believes that all of West Vail will benefit from having a Master Plan. For the commercial areas it could provide architectural themes, traffic and parking plans, pedestrian friendly environments and be a boon to redevelopment, similar to what happened in the village core during the Billion Dollar Renaissance. For the residential areas it could bring unity and order as redevelopment proliferates.

Rumor has it that some see the West Vail master plan as an opportunity to increase residential density by increasing allowable GRFA and allowing larger housing projects, including tax-subsidized housing. Rumor also has it that some would like to increase commercial densities. This should only be done with the approval of the affected neighborhoods. And, if densities are increased, any such increases should be tied to capacity, i.e., the availability of water and energy, infrastructure and parking to support the larger densities. Otherwise, increased growth is not sustainable.

The Importance of Master Planning. Master Plans provide fundamental foundational basis for long-term development that helps define the character and identity of communities. They serve as community “roadmaps” that provide the means to gauge the merits of new proposals. For example, in the absence of a West Vail Master Plan, the recent Roost Lodge redevelopment was able to proceed as a Special Development District with little or no consideration of a unified development of the area.

Special Development Districts are the flip side of master planning; they are largely ad hoc, spot zoning, which lacks the cohesiveness of long-range planning. They are mostly standard-less and driven by behind-the-scene lobbying that is subject to the political winds of the moment, where the tables are often stacked in favor of developers who gather a team of “consultants” that can overwhelm citizen opposition. That is what happened with the recent Roost Lodge SDD approval. By the time the revised plans saw the light of day, members of the Vail Housing Authority were already on board and the provision of “affordable” housing trumped density and neighborhood concerns. That is not a process that is beneficial to the long range future of Vail.

What You Can Do. If these are matters that concern you, get informed and become involved. Government responds to the public; silence only enables others with different agendas to act in your absence. If you are not already a member, join the Vail Homeowners Association. Together, we will continue to shine a spotlight on these issues that concern everyone.

VHA [Membership:](#)

The Vail Homeowners Association has entered into a sharing relationship with the following “community building” not-for-profit organizations. In this way, we increase the reach of our advocacy, and together we seek to improve our community in ways that will benefit all. From time to time, VHA will report on the agendas and activities of these organizations. This is a non-exclusive relationship, and other “community building” not-for-profit organizations may join our endeavors.



Colorado Ski & Snowboard Museum and Hall of Fame
231 South Frontage Road East
Vail, Colorado 81657
970-476-1876
www.skimuseum.net

The museum's purpose is to preserve and communicate the lore of the modern mountain winter sports movement in Colorado and its contribution to the evolution of Vail and the state's mountain winter sports communities.

[Read more:](#)



PO Box 100 | Vail, CO 81658
P: 970-680-3525

C: 970-315-2675

www.vailcentre.org

The Vail Centre organization exists to provide learning experiences to those taking responsibility for inspiring Vail and the communities of the future.

[Read more:](#)



Walking Mountains Science Center
318 Walking Mountains Lane | PO Box 9469 | Avon, CO 81620
970.827.9725

www.walkingmountains.org

The mission of Walking Mountains is to awaken a sense of wonder and inspire environmental stewardship and sustainability through natural science education for the Vail community and Eagle County.

[Read more:](#)

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Post Office Box 238 Vail, Colorado 81658

Telephone: (970) 827-5680 E-mail: vha@vail.net Web Site: www.vailhomeowners.com