

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION, INC.



Can Vail sustain more high density growth? Upsized proposal for the redevelopment of [Roost Lodge Site](#) in West Vail.

Vail's Next Fifty?

September 9, 2016

Vail's Fiftieth. Kudos to the Town of Vail as it celebrated its fiftieth anniversary on August 23. At its beginning, community leaders realized that Vail Mountain was a potential jewel of a ski area but that it needed the supporting infrastructure of a Town at its base to ensure success. Starting literally from scratch, they had the vision and courage to think big and develop plans to manage growth and build what is today the Town of Vail.

For much of the past 50 years, the Town (and the Mountain) has been growing to the point that, with the exception of the Ever Vail property, it is now fully built-out. The success of the founder's vision is evident throughout the Town. It is a magical experience for both visitors and residents, and today's leaders are rightfully proud of what has been achieved.

While Vail has evolved into a first class international resort, there are some cracks in its veneer. No longer is Vail at the top of consumer ratings, and its status has been in decline for several years, raising the question of whether there needs to be a qualitative rebalancing. And while the mass marketing approach of recent years has produced economic benefits, there are increasing questions over the wisdom of pursuing larger and larger crowds. Added to these concerns is the fact that over the past 50 years Vail has been largely a company town, becoming even more so in recent years as Vail Resorts (VR) has moved into retail, rental and transportation

businesses. Now, new developments are calling into question whether that will be a sustainable course for the next 50 years.

Vail Resorts' Relationship With The Town. If it was not already apparent with VRs acquisition of Park City and the link-up to the Canyon ski resort, the recent announcement of VRs acquisition of the Whistler ski resort makes it clear that VR is now the premier ski resort company in the world. This is good news for VR stock holders and Epic pass skiers, but what does it mean for the town of Vail? Will Vail continue to be the crown jewel of VR's resorts? Will Vail Mountain continue to be a primary focus of VR's investment? Will the company even be called VR in the future?

These questions, and more, now swirl about as Vail ponders its next 50 years. For its part, VR acknowledges that there needs to be better cooperation with the Town of Vail and says that it wants to work with the Town to solve two of the community's most pressing problems: parking and housing. But, as the Mayor noted, "talk is cheap" it is now time for action. Parking and housing are only two of Vail's problems. What will become of Ever Vail? As noted recently by a member of the Town Council, at one time VR "engaged in gratuitous acts of corporate responsibility." Will that continue, and will the Town of Vail continue to be a beneficiary of VR's business plans?

One thing seems obvious, Vail needs to rethink its relationship with and dependence upon VR for its future and prosperity. It may be that Vail continues to be the focus of VR's plans, but it would be prudent to plan for the future in case that turns out not to be the case. To paraphrase, "Vail should trust but be prepared."

How To Prepare. Vail is always going to be a resort community. Whether Vail continues to be the crown jewel of VR's resorts, tourism is going to be the economic engine that drives Vail. And, much of that tourism is centered on the Mountain. So one aspect of being prepared is to recognize the importance of the Mountain and adopt policies that support its continued vitality. Yes, VR calls the shots on the mountain but that doesn't mean that Vail as a community does not have a responsibility to take steps that will enhance the on-mountain experience for both visitors and residents alike.

There is much more to Vail than just the ski mountain. Vail enjoys an unsurpassed natural environment, from the beautiful surrounding mountains and forests to Gore Creek, and it has vibrant and varied cultural programs. These too are important elements of the "Vail experience" that need to be nurtured and maintained for the future.



And, there is also the basic community: its diversity, infrastructure and economic health.

Sustainability For The Future. So how does Vail best position itself for the next 50 years? VHA suggests that Vail should plan for sustainability; that Vail should adopt policies that will maintain its community, culture and environment into the foreseeable future.

A recent Vail Daily article posed the question: "Can Vail become a sustainable resort?" In a way, it was a rhetorical question because the answer is clearly yes, if there is political will and leadership to lead the way. VHA believes the better question is "Should Vail become a sustainable community?" And the answer is "Yes, it must" if Vail is to succeed over the next 50 years.

Fortunately, steps in that direction are already underway. The Town of Vail, in conjunction with the Walking Mountains Science Center, is working on a plan to achieve designation as a Global Sustainable Resort. This is an outgrowth of the Actively Green campaign conducted during the 2015 FIS Alpine World Ski Championships. Actively Green was a way for local businesses to obtain state certification for environmentally sound practices.

The new sustainability tourism effort is broader. It fosters adoption of “universal sustainable tourism practices.” The focus of Walking Mountain/Town of Vail effort, so far, seems to be primarily environmental: recycling, cleaning up Gore Creek, providing workforce housing to reduce transportation impacts and encouraging alternative energy use.

While the environment is hugely important, VHA urges that sustainability should have a broader, more comprehensive goal that embraces all aspects of the community.

How to Become a Sustainable Community. It would seem that a first step would be a critical, realistic examination of Vail’s “carrying capacity.” Vail will never be a typical urban community, nor would most want that to be the case. Vail’s charm lies in the fact that it is a mountain retreat nestled in a beautiful valley. As such, there is a finite limit to Vail’s capacities. Infrastructure and facilities can impact those capacities, but it would seem that Vail should not seek simply to get “bigger” as part of a sustainability strategy, or at least, that is a question that should be answered at the outset. After all, a goal of “bigger” ultimately is never sustainable.

A step in that direction occurred when VR opened the Blue Sky Basin. At that time, there was an assessment of mountain capacity at 20,000 skiers. Not much is known about how that number was determined, but it was reduced to writing in an agreement between VR, the Town and the Forest Service. However, it was a limit without meaning because there is no enforcement process and no consequences if that number is exceeded.

Another “step” in that direction occurred when Vail obtain limited permission from the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) for overflow parking on the Frontage Roads. Again not much is known about how the limits on that parking were determined, and in recent years, they have been quietly expanded. And when it came to summer use, Vail just allowed on-street overflow parking without any permission. Now, what started out as a limited temporary relief measure has grown into a significant public safety issue.

These are not the kind of assessments that should drive a sustainability goal. Any capacity assessment should be real and transparent with objective criteria and benchmarks. If there is no accountability, limits are meaningless. Voters have already had to impose limits; once in 2005 when a Convention Center was rejected in Vail, and in 1972 when Colorado voters rejected the Winter Olympics. It would be better to have a plan so that citizens do not have to resort to the ballot box to impose limits.



Simba Run Underpass is taking shape. The carrying capacity of Vail’s central boulevard is being extended by 20 years.

The proposed [upsizing of a previously approved redevelopment of the Roost Lodge site](#) may well spark a sustainability debate over residents concern about locating high density redevelopment projects in existing West Vail residential neighborhoods and elsewhere throughout the community.

Other Steps. Another step would be to solve Vail’s pressing problems in ways that would create a sustainable path for the future. Action is already underway to clean up Gore Creek and restore it to Gold Metal status. Roadway and transportation infrastructure improvements are, likewise, underway to provide for the future, with Vail having already achieved a “silver” status for its biking improvements. But, there has yet to be action on some of Vail’s other pressing problems.

Importance of Solving Parking and Housing Issues. Parking and housing are perhaps Vail’s two most pressing problems; ones that are at the heart of any sustainability plan. These appear to have reached a critical level requiring immediate action. Recently the Town Council pulled back from tax initiatives to finance more parking and affordable housing to allow time to negotiate with VR and develop concrete plans. That was a prudent step, but as those plans are being developed, they should include a realistic assessment of the future parking and housing needs so that the resulting solutions foster a sustainable community.

The Town Housing Authority and Planning staff has also just announced a bold plan to deed-restrict 1000 units in 10 years. The plan would cost \$3.7 million the first year, increasing to \$5 million for the next three years with tax increases to fund the remaining years. Whether this plan becomes reality remains to be seen.



Safety complaint being heard from neighborhood residents about Booth Fall trail head parking. Photo: Steve Prawdzik

Time is of the essence. The parking problem grows worse while we wait. There has now been resort to on-street Frontage Road parking for the Booth Falls trail head, and tourists continue to stream into the mountains with three weekends in July recording the top-three counts ever through Eisenhower Tunnel. And, housing shortages continue to grow while a county-wide solution has yet to be addressed in any meaningful way.

Bigger Is Not Better, Nor Sustainable. Economic health is also vital to sustainability. In recent years, it has seemed, at times, that “bigger” has been a goal of Vail’s economic development plans. Although not a Vail initiative, the recent ill-proposed KABOO event is the poster child for this trend. However, high-volume tourism is not necessarily a good thing, and ever bigger events with higher impacts are not sustainable.

Sustainability requires recognizing limits and adopting policies that work within those limits, the opposite of growth for growth’s sake. It envisions a balance between tourism and the community: between economic development and preservation of community assets and values, and between our beauty and culture and demands for more uses of it. For a resort community, it means managing tourism so that the community and its environment can be enjoyed by both visitors and residents alike. And, it means carrying those values into the future so that generations to come have the same opportunities.

The Elephant In The Room. Vail’s sustainability is directly impacted by the numbers of skiers (and now summer tourists) using the Mountain. Up until recently, that seems to have been a manageable number, but VR does not release any information to judge how that might be changing, especially since the introduction of the Epic Pass. All that is known is that there is no limit on the number of Epic Passes or day passes that VR sells. Antidotal experience seems to indicate that those numbers are growing and on-mountain safety, likewise, seems to be a growing problem.

These are issues that should be discussed with VR in an effort to find ways to make Mountain experiences safe and sustainable for the future. While Vail has no right to limit access to the Mountain, it can discuss these issues and express its opinions or concerns to both VR and the Forest Service. And, part of the dialogue should include obtaining on-mountain incident records so that Vail can form evidence-based judgments about those activities. After all, with its future inextricably tied to the Mountain, Vail has a direct interest in knowing what is going on. And, while Vail has no right to control mountain activities, it can, if necessary, affect skier numbers by eliminating on-street parking and adopting locals-first parking priorities in its parking facilities. VHA does not advocate doing so at this time, but there needs to be attention to the impact of on-mountain activity as it relates to Vail’s long term sustainability.

Other Players. While many questions remain about VR’s plans and intentions, the Vail Valley Medical Center has quietly become Vail’s major employer and a financial colossus, ranking up huge profits and reserves. It will be even more so with the redevelopment and expansion of its campus. The first phase is nearing completion, and the entire project is scheduled to be finished in 2020, bringing a state-of-the-art facility to Vail. As Vail’s major in-town corporate player, VVMC will be integral to Vail’s sustainability. At the same time, VVMC also solicits and receives charitable support from the community. Charity is a two-way street, and much is expected from those to whom much is given. That, too, will be a factor in Vail’s sustainability.

With a mission to sustain and enhance the quality of life of the Vail community and a large endowment, the Vail Valley Foundation (VVF) is also integral to Vail’s sustainability. But, the recent attempt to bring a supersized KABOO, 15,000 to 30,000 people, event to Vail and plans to expand the annual Birds of Prey ski race to a weeklong event raise sustainability questions. Whether the VVF mission is changing, and if so, how, will directly impact Vail’s sustainability.

These are questions which VHA believes need to be addressed as part of the planning for Vail’s future.

Is It Necessary? Underscoring the importance of these efforts is the mixed results of recent economic news. While VR continues a healthy business outlook, experiencing, companywide, a 14.7% increase in skier visits during the February thru April, 3rd quarter, other indicators are showing some head winds might be growing. The price per square foot and average sale price for Vail Village residential real estate has been dropping for several months. The monthly Town of Vail financial status report indicates Real Estate Transfer Tax margins have contracted by 23.9% and sales tax receipts are modestly ahead of this time last year. The sales tax report for the winter season was not flattering to several categories of local businesses, with anecdotal commentary that the summer’s large crowds are filling the lodging properties but are being unusually frugal with their retail spending. Achieving sustainability could go a long way to improving Vail’s economic health.



In Memoriam: The Vail Homeowners Association mourns the passing and celebrates the well lived life of [Bill Smith](#), a founding member, part time resident, pioneer and moving force in the ongoing creation of the Vail community.

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:](#)

VHA [Membership:](#)

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