

What's the best way forward for Vail?

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VAIL — It's time for Vail to expand its horizons from North America to the rest of the world.

Jim Ellis, a longtime Vail homeowner and dean of the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California, took some time to address the Vail Homeowners Association's Dec. 29 annual meeting at Vail Town Hall. That meeting included second-home owners from around the country, and always draws a variety of officials and executives from the town and Vail Resorts, as both speakers and listeners.

During his remarks at the end of the meeting, Ellis talked about a project in which 10 MBA candidates from the school came to Vail in 2011 to do an analysis of the town's marketing and other business practices.

"Your grade is an A," Ellis said. "You've done a fantastic job. The town of Vail is in great shape — it's well run and you have great partnerships in place."

Those partnerships, which came up often during the meeting, are moving local governments and businesses from "silos" of self-interest to partnerships of community interest, he said.

Those things will help make Vail a premier international destination, he said.

But, Ellis said, Vail is in transition. With the slide in the real estate and development industry, Vail is now more dependent than ever on its resort economy. The town's product is changing, too, from "snow and ski to ski and sun," Ellis said.

The town and resort are also moving from being leaders in the North American resort business to leaders in the world resort business, Ellis said.

"We've got to be thinking beyond, 'Who's Aspen?' to 'Who's Chamonix?'" Ellis said, challenging local leaders to think about Davos, Switzerland, and its annual World Economic Forum. Vail has the ability to host something similar, he said.

But the move toward becoming a global resort will require some extra effort and research. Ellis said community leaders need to look not just at individual resorts for comparison, but at leaders everywhere, in fields from golf to athletics to health and education to get a comprehensive view of what Vail does well now and can do better in the future.

Citing research that indicates it takes five visits to turn a tourist into a real estate buyer, Ellis told his fellow homeowners that they need to continually talk about the community's strengths, and continue to welcome tourists with open arms.

And, after listening to reports from town, resort and Vail Valley Foundation officials, Ellis said Vail's future is in good hands.

"I couldn't be more excited about what I heard here today," he said.

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