John and Diana Donovan

Letters to Vail

V a i l H o m e o w n e r s A s s o c i a t i o n

The Passing of John Donovan
Vail Community Leader and Town of Vail Councilman.
December 21, 2025

The Vail Homeowners Association mourns the passing of John Donovan at 89. John, his wife Diana, and family exemplify the heart and soul of the community. VHA honors their trailblazing contributions, dedication in setting the highest standards of excellence, caring for Vail's natural environment, and the people of the community. VHA Board of Directors

John Donovan's voice and enthusiastic personality influenced the formation of the Vail community and municipal government from the earliest days. He spoke for workers, whether in Council debates or when holding forth while dispensing beverages at the Copper Bar on Bridge Street. He brought to light the opinions and aspirations of those who held the threads of the community's survival in their hands; the snowcat drivers, ski patrol, merchants, public officials, and the hardworking people who created a sense of belonging and participated in creating something special.

John was plain spoken; he did not suffer fools lightly. Yet, he embraced the dreamers, cheering them on, lending a helping hand, giving pragmatic encouragement to those seeking to preserve the natural grandeur that surrounded the fledgling resort community.

Tragically, his public presence fell silent, lost to a head injury in a skiing accident in 1980. He lived on for many years under the care and perseverance of Diana, and family. Their children carry on the family legacy. Daughter, Kerry, has served terms in the Vail and Colorado legislature, and sons Matt and John carried on the family waste management company, pioneering sensible, environmentally focused practices for Vail and Eagle County.

Raised in Chicago, John married into a Colorado family, known for its commitment to the preservation of wilderness in the national forests. He and Diana stirred the passion and conscience of residents and property owners to become guardians of the environment and community.

Diana's father, Bill Mounsey, was held in high esteem by officials of the United States Forest Service (USFS). He was known as an outspoken proponent of the country's environmental preservation and conservation movements. The movements preserved pristine landscapes, wildlife habitats, and managed the use of natural resources on Federal lands primarily throughout the American West.

The Donovan family was instrumental in the creation of the Holy Cross and Eagle's Nest Wilderness Areas. Through these conservation efforts, the extraordinary natural beauty and wildlife of the region surrounding Vail were largely preserved. The wilderness designation effort coincided with the desire of the Vail Town Council, on which John served, and of Vail Associates, the resort operator, for whom John worked, to protect the Federal lands bordering Vail, which included the restoration of nearby land that had been damaged through mining and timber extraction.

Local efforts in support of the creation of the Holy Cross and Eagle's Nest Wilderness Areas put Vail's government in close contact with the Colorado State Capital and the leadership in Washington, D.C. John and other key council members were able to establish a rewarding dialogue with the Colorado Governor's office and with President Gerald R. Ford and his administration.

John's election to the Vail Town Council in 1966 added a persuasive opinion that affected the formation of the newly formed Town government and influenced the operation of the ski mountain. In its early years, the Town government arbitrated the needs of the ski corporation and the public. Investors focused on exclusivity, skiing, real estate development, and preserving the natural environment. Residents wanted a balance between preserving nature and controlling investor development. John was instrumental in the Town's adoption of the Real Estate Transfer Tax, (RETT), which continues to enable the Town to expand parks, trails, and community-focused recreational amenities.

The effective arbitration of public and private interests led to an explosion in development during the 1970s, warranting intervention by the Town to reduce zoning density and the perception of urbanization through the control of architectural and landscape design. John and the Council championed land use regulations that were adopted to ensure a harmonious relationship between man-made development and the valley's natural environment. They invested heavily in public improvements, pedestrianized public streets, and preserved open spaces. Their actions, unprecedented for the times, secured the economic and cultural success of the Vail community and region for decades to come.

When John was term-limited after serving on Council for fourteen years, Diana stepped into local politics, assuming the mantle of conservationism, not only for the natural environment, but for the preservation of the Vail local community as well. Diana served on the Vail Planning & Environmental Commission and as an influential Councilperson for many years. She remains an indomitable voice of importance and ongoing contribution.