



The TOV's condemnation of Booth Heights for wildlife habitat is one way to stop the bickering.

Letters to Vail

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

The Sad Reality of Vail's Affordable Employee Housing

May 31, 2022

[Kudos to Vail Mayor, Kim Langmaid, and the Town Council for their resolve to find a solution to the Booth Heights mess.](#) Unfortunately, it takes two to tango and also two to reach agreements, and, despite all of Vail Resorts' high-minded pronouncements about protecting the environment, in the case of affordable employee housing, VR is plowing straight ahead on a path that all the disinterested scientists predict will destroy the East Vail bighorn sheep herd.

It didn't have to be this way. VR's predecessor, Vail Associates (VA), would not have let this happen. VA was invested in the town and worked in partnership with the TOV to build a vibrant, successful community. VA provided leadership and contributed property and money to improve the town and enhance the quality of life. But, then in 1992, VR acquired VA, and a bottom-line mentality began to take over as the partnership with the town unraveled. (The new VR owners continued to operate as VA for a few years before rebranding as Vail Resorts.) That process accelerated when headquarters was moved to Broomfield.

Nowhere have the repercussions been more profound than with employee housing. In town meetings over Booth Heights, VR officials and employees have flooded the meetings bemoaning the lack of housing, and VR has blamed its recent poor performances on its inability to attract employees because there is no where for them to live. But the real reason there is an employee housing deficit for its employees is Vail Resorts' broken promises and missed opportunities. And, at the same time, all the bottom-line mentality has achieved is for Vail to fall out of the top tier ski resorts in America.

The employee housing problem traces back to, at least, the 1990s. It was then that the new ownership wanted to expand into what became known as Blue Sky. There was already a housing problem. After over a year of discussions to obtain the TOV's support for Blue Sky, on March 21, 1995, VA agreed that it would work with the TOV to increase affordable employee housing. [The agreement covered many other matters which will be the subject of the next Letter.] What became of that lofty promise? Nothing. The agreement was quickly put on the shelf where it is still gathering dust today.

What has VR done in the interim to improve housing? Very Little. It did acquire the property to fill out the EverVail site, and it used the lure of employee housing to get a Master Plan and a bunch of permits for the development of that site. That plan included housing for hundreds of employees at what was Cascade Crossing, but after the plan was finalized, VR abandoned its development. As a consequence, that housing was never built. VR, however, still owns that property and could build the employee housing on part of it any time it wanted, so it has had the ability to solve its employee housing crisis at any time it chose.





EverVail development was to include workforce housing in these buildings

VR did take one small step in that regard. It developed the First Chair apartments in Lionshead but that can only accommodate a maximum of 124 employees out of a workforce of thousands. It is only a drop in the bucket, nowhere near to what VR needs to take care of its employees. And aside from that, for over 25 years, VR has sat on its hands, doing nothing about employee housing.

In the meantime, the Town of Vail moved forward to address housing needs with the Timber Ridge development, other selective smaller developments and its Indeed deed restricted housing program. Vail has steadily added to the community affordable housing inventory and was even willing to devote critical financial resources to solve the Booth Heights mess.

Bighorn sheep are an iconic species. Fiercely independent, they survive in the most rugged of environments. It's no wonder that Vailites so closely identify with them and that they are Colorado's Official State Animal. The East Vail herd has lived in the area for perhaps hundreds of years. For many years, it was thought that their winter range was protected open space. But the herd is perilously close to "small population" size when it can no longer regenerate itself. Bighorn sheep are easily stressed by human activities, and it would not take much more to push the herd over the edge.



Herd is facing extension if development of Booth Heights occurs.

Then suddenly, in 2016, it was discovered that VR owned the Booth Heights property which sits astride the sheep's winter range. By then VR had swelled into a corporate behemoth that was largely focused on shareholder value; gone were the days of community partnership. Rather than doing the right thing in keeping with its pledge to protect the natural environment, VR rushed to monetize its ownership. It hired a biologist who produced a flawed report supporting development at the site (all the other scientists said NO), and it rushed to get approval for a 143 unit development. VR officers lobbied for approval. A VR employee provided the deciding vote, and a complicit majority of the

then Town Council was all too willing to go along. The project was slated to include a hefty amount of market rate units which could have brought a sizable profit.



Residences at Main Vail under construction.

When Vail voters revolted and installed a new majority on the Town Council, VR said it would negotiate in good faith for another solution. Vail offered an alternative site (the Residences at Main Vail) and overly generous financial incentives. We are told that the parties “were just one red line away” from an agreement before VR walked away. But whether VR ever was acting in good faith is an open question since it walked away from an astoundingly beneficial deal. VR is not stupid, so it’s hard to understand why it would do so, unless greed and arrogance reared their ugly heads. For its part, the TOV nonetheless proceeded with the Residences at Main Vail and exploring other housing options.

VR took a different, decidedly arrogant path. Without any permission or right, VR took the original Booth Height plans, made a few cosmetic changes, and pushed ahead with plans to build Booth Heights, causing Triumph Development to issue a cease-and-desist letter over the use of the original plans. If past is prologue, VR will just ignore that letter.

Most recently, the Town Council offered yet another olive branch, but it was rejected by VR in posturing, argumentative response. VR can afford the best advice, and one doesn’t send a letter like that if they want to negotiate in good faith. So much for protecting the environment or working with the Town. And so much for any longer holding out hope that VR will do the right thing.

The only alternative left is condemnation, a process the Town Council has already begun. Now, given the most recent developments, the Town needs to move as fast as possible. It needs to get the condemnation case filed and move for a TRO to block construction at the site. Otherwise, VR bulldozers will soon be ripping up the hillside.

What this portends for the future is not encouraging. Might does not make right. While Vail needs a successful VR and should do all it can to help achieve that outcome, it cannot survive if it has to bow to the dictates of a corporate master, especially one that seemingly does not care about the community. Vail should continue to work to become a sustainable community and find win-win solutions that are in the best interests of the community, even if that means carving a different path from VR or taking a path in opposition to VR. Bending instead to VR’s demands will only foster more of the same.

VHA provides clear and concise discussions of matters affecting the Vail community in the belief that an informed citizenry will be an engaged citizenry. We intend to promote more citizen involvement and community discussions of issues facing the Town. If these are issues that concern you, please make your views known to [town officials](#). Public discussion of current issues by concerned citizens creates an environment to further community initiatives. We heartily encourage your input in shaping the road ahead.

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