



It's time to change and sustain – South Frontage Road at Lionshead – circa 1970s.

Letters to Vail

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

Sustainability: Lessons From the Past

June 6, 2022

The Town of Vail is in the midst of a year-long sustainability study. It comes at a time when the Town's goal of being a premier mountain resort community, by providing high quality of life, is in serious jeopardy. Everything is, or should be, on the table from overcrowding to marketing goals, to special events, to parking and transportation, to adequate employee housing and to the environment. The question is what steps and policies does Vail need to adopt to balance economic vitality with the quality of life in a way that preserves community values and the natural environment for future generations and how to do so without sacrificing what makes Vail unique.

This is not a new issue. It has been a concern, if not a priority, of the community since at least the mid-1980s. It was then that the "skiers-at-one-time" (SAOT) on the mountain limit was set at 19,900 skiers although VR claims that the "comfortable carrying capacity" of the mountain is actually 25,000. Under the USFS Special Use Permit (SUP) for Vail Mountain, if 19,900 skiers was exceeded, Vail Associates (VA) was supposed to "consult with" the USFS to "evaluate" the situation. The TOV was not part of that process. The SUP did not require VA to take any specific action; there was no public reporting and no enforcement or accountability mechanism, and there were no penalties for violations.

In 1995, the procedures for the management of SAOT on the mountain were formalized, and the TOV was included in that process. At that time, the new owners of VA wanted to expand into what became known as Blue Sky Basin and redevelop Golden Peak, and the TOV wanted a seat at the table concerning on-mountain operations. [Apollo purchased VA in May 1992; it continued to operate as VA until January 1997 when it was renamed Vail Resorts.]

At the culmination of a year of discussion, VA reached an agreement with the TOV to secure its support for the mountain expansions. [The result was a comprehensive 36-page document with numerous attachments.](#) A three-tier system was established which included a series of steps to be implemented immediately. If SAOT exceeded 19,900 for more than two days between December 26 – 31 or other high season dates, additional steps were to be implemented, and if SAOT still exceeded 19,900 then a comprehensive review was called for which could result in restrictions on further ticket sales.

To implement the agreement, an Assessment Committee was to be established, consisting of two members from the TOV and two from VR which would meet bimonthly during ski season or immediately if SAOT limits were exceeded and at other times to assess the success of the program and make recommendations for further action. VA was to provide the committee with a wide range of information about skier visitations, including detailed information about skiers on the mountain. In addition, a task force was to be appointed to explore additional ways to address carrying capacity issues. And under open meetings law, the work of the committee and task force would be open to the public.



Summer – Frontage Road Parking.

While the agreement focused on balancing visitation between peak periods—when the carrying capacities of the community and the mountain are occasionally pushed—and other times, it addressed important sustainability issues, noting that “a high influx of cars, traffic, and parking problems can compromise the quality of the Vail

experience.” While the agreement focused on winter periods, it also recognized that the same issues existed in non-winter periods.

To manage skier traffic, VA agreed to work with the TOV “to ensure that community carrying capacities are not exceeded.” Both parties recognized this was necessary for “the satisfaction of guest, residents and property owners.” Interestingly, the steps to be taken included management of Front Range advertising and the potential of limiting lift ticket sales. [The agreement also addressed employee housing](#), the construction of a roundabout at South Frontage Road and Vail Road, support for a regional transportation authority and the creation of new open space properties.

What became of all those promises and commitments? VA got its expansions; the roundabout was constructed, and there was some new open space created. As far as VHA has been able to establish, neither the Assessment Committee nor Task Force were ever appointed although the TOV does informally meet sporadically with VR, but none of that is open to the public. What is discussed in those informal meetings is not known. There is no regular schedule for those meetings, no agendas for those meetings, no minutes of the meetings and no reports to the Town Council. And importantly, according to VHA research, VR never provided the on-mountain skier information.

In the meantime, in 2006, VR moved its headquarters to Broomfield and began the process of rapidly growing into the largest ski resort operator in the world, and two years later embarked on the Epic pass program. Ever since, VR has aggressively sold ever increasing numbers of passes. However, Vail then began a precipitous decline in skier approval polls. Originally, Vail was consistently the number 1 resort (14 out of 19 years) in the *SKI Magazine* poll, but in recent years it has fallen steadily, and last year it fell out of the top 10 ski resorts in North America.

So, what are the lessons from this experience?

1. Solving overcrowding should be job number 1. It was already a problem in 1995; it is now a many magnitudes larger problem. VR refuses to release any information about skiers on the mountain, but last year, VR sold 700,000 more Epic passes than the previous year (a 76% increase from 2019-20), and this winter there were 53 days of Frontage Road parking, significantly more than the allowable number. Antidotal reports of on-mountain collisions and overcrowding abounded. Already, in an insatiable race to pad the bottom-line, VR is pounding past visitors to buy Epic passes for next year. And a “heads-in-beds” off-season marketing program and special events have flooded the town during summer months. Turning Vail into a Walmart resort is unsustainable and the exact opposite of Vail’s vision for itself.
2. Closely related to and a direct result of overcrowding is Vail’s reputation as a ski resort. That reputation is critical to the sustainability of the community, and Vail’s reputation is headed in the wrong direction. Already it has sunk to second-tier status, and after the past year, it will not be surprising if its ranking sinks even lower. Much of what drives a ski resort’s reputation is out of the Town’s hands, but overcrowding, which inevitably leads to on-mountain safety issues, is something that the Town can address. It can do that by limiting parking to public and private parking structures and dispensing with unlimited Frontage Road parking, reserving that for true overflow days such as Christmas and the Fourth of July. It can also do that by demanding a review of the SAOT number in which the TOV has a seat at the table and other community stakeholders have input. A lower SAOT would not only reduce on-mountain crowding and lower the frequency of accidents, it would also reduce Town congestion and the need for additional parking. Failure to take action makes the Town complicit in the deterioration of Vail as a ski destination.

3. As the 1995 agreement recognized, the key to effective planning is determination of the carrying capacity that will maintain values and resources. A forthright appraisal of the Town's carrying capacity is the bedrock of sustainability. A key part of the sustainability study should be a frank "eyes open" assessment of Vail's carrying capacity. That was true back in 1995 and is still true today. Without it, the Town is flying blind in making future plans as when it was assumed that more and more special events would solve all problems, and thousands were spent marketing to front-range visitors.
4. VR cannot be looked to for solutions or help. If VR could not be relied on in 1995, it certainly cannot be relied on now that a partnership with the Town has been replaced with posturing disengagement. At a time when many businesses are taking a more holistic approach that values customers and employees, VR seems to cling to a bottom-line mentality of selling as many Epic passes as possible regardless of the consequences and doing as little as possible for it's workers. It only raised employee pay recently because it was forced to do so to obtain enough workers, and [its efforts to develop Booth Heights seems to be as much about profit as worker benefits.](#)

As the 1995 agreement makes clear, VR has detailed data about skiers and the way they use the mountain and on-mountain safety which could inform sustainability strategies, but it steadfastly refuses to divulge that information, claiming it is "proprietary." That is just a smoke screen to avoid sharing what could be embarrassing information that could cause Vail to sink even lower in skier approval polls. The Town should demand that VR be forthcoming and release this information. If it continues to refuse to do so, the Town should turn to the community's elected public officials to pass legislation that will force it to do so. The Town has the right to know how VR is operating within the community.

5. Plans do not create lasting change, leaders do. Sustainability plans only work if there is dedicated, continuous, long-term leadership to achieve results. The 1995 management plan was a good plan for the times, but without follow through from leadership, it was quickly forgotten. Without leadership to implement the forthcoming plans, they will become just more hollow promises. That leadership must come from the community. It is on the community to elect leaders who understand and embrace sustainability, who are willing to take the long-view and who are committed to finding solutions. We are off to a good start with the current study, but the hard work begins when the study has been completed.
6. Plans need clear achievable goals, regular transparent reporting and an accountability matrix. The USFS Special Use Permit has no such provisions. The 1995 agreement was well intended, but it lacked clearly achievable goals; there was no reporting mechanism and no accountability for its implementation. And key provisions were never followed.
7. Sustainability will require financial resources. The Town should consider the lift tax as a potential source of revenue for those undertakings. From an equity standpoint, VR has contributed much to Vail's current problems. Apparently, VR is no longer going to step up and help with the solutions, so it would be appropriate to raise the lift tax to finance those changes.

It's not too late to right the Vail ship. If done right, the current study should provide a realistic plan for the future then it will be up to Vail's leaders to implement it.

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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