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Letters to Vail

VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION

It's Time for Vail Resorts to Step Up

February 9, 2022

Dissatisfaction with Vail Resorts continues to spread. What started as a protest at the Stevens Pass Ski Area has grown into outrage at Crested Butte and Park City (a trending hashtag on Instagram #VailFail) and simmering unrest at other locales, including Vail. The discontent is wide-ranging: covering everything from overcrowding to understaffed facilities, to penny-wise wages, to declines in the quality of its product, to high prices for on-mountain food and beverages. It seems that as Vail Resorts morphed into a major conglomerate, making money and racking up profits and financial returns, it got complacent. It lost sight of the quality of its product and became disconnected from the communities in which it does business. And in Vail that has resulted in a precipitous decline in skier approval ratings which hurts the company and the town alike.

But this is not another “the sky is falling” diatribe about Vail Resorts. Yes, much of what has happened was preventable. Staffing issues have been growing for several years. Wages could have been raised earlier. Housing has been a problem for years. More thought could have been given to on-mountain amenities. But VR cannot be blamed for the weather or the effects of the pandemic. At the same time, blaming its problems on a “global talent shortage” and the effects of the pandemic, as VR has done, ignores the much bigger problem that looms in the background.

VR enjoys a monopoly to use public lands—land that belongs to all of us—and it makes a tidy profit from that privilege. But with that privilege comes responsibilities. It has to be a good steward of the land, and by all standards, it has done a good job in that regard. Its environmental policies have been pro-active, and it has been an outspoken advocate of climate protection. But its responsibilities do not end there.

VR also has responsibilities to the communities that enable its business to flourish. Corporations should not be just about maximizing profits; they are part of the communities that facilitate and support their activities. In VR's case, its communities are its customers and the local towns and villages that make its operations possible.

In terms of its customers, VR needs to recognize that it needs to solve overcrowding on its mountains. That seems to be a particular problem at Vail. The days of “anyone showing up with a pass gets to ski” and hundreds of cars on the Frontage Roads need to end. And it's not just the long lift lines whenever there is fresh snow. VR claims that once everyone gets up the mountain, skiers and riders are dispersed and there is no longer any problem. But until VR discloses the data on the incidence of on-mountain injuries, any such claim is highly suspect. There is already a growing volume of anecdotal evidence that safety is a serious problem on Vail Mountain, made all the more so this year by the lack of snowfall. Hiding behind a claim of “proprietary information” to block any data about the true state of on-mountain safety disservices its customers. If the mountain is truly “safe,” VR should be willing to demonstrate that fact. And, if it is not, as many suspect, it should be willing to take steps to correct that situation.

Also, in terms of its customers, VR needs to improve the quality of its product. Installing new or upgraded chairs only partly fulfills that responsibility. Having sufficient and satisfied staff is critical. And providing on-mountain food and beverage service at reasonable prices, even if it lowers profit margins, should be a prime goal.

In terms of the Town of Vail, VR needs to recognize that it has a symbiotic relationship with the town. Its policies and practices drive much of what happens in the town. What it does or doesn't do should be calibrated in terms of benefits or impacts to both its business and the town. Long-time locals will remember the days when the attitude was what was good for the Town, was good for VR. But as VR shifted to Broomfield and grew into a corporate behemoth, the focus shifted to what was best for VR's stockholders. That, together with the lack of local authority and the loss of middle management, has created a growing disconnect between Broomfield and the TOV, something that was on full display recently in the aborted negotiations over Booth Heights.

If VR is going to continue to sell as many Epic Passes as possible, it has a responsibility to solve the overcrowding that it is creating in Vail and its' other resorts. It may be that VR will have to implement a reservations system, much like what is being done in many national parks. It is essential that parking be addressed in some meaningful way. Solutions to these problems are not the point of this Letter, but there is a prime opportunity for VR to step up in the recently created TOV Destination Stewardship plan study. VR should seek to join hands with the town and engage in that process to help create a workable plan for the future. It should designate knowledgeable representatives to participate in that process with full authority to make commitments and decisions. And it should seek to restore the relationship with the town that made Vail the premier ski resort in America.

Whether all this requires restructuring of VR will be for it to decide. One thing that does seem clear, VR cannot continue to pursue a short-term business model that only focuses on the bottom line and stockholder value. It instead needs a long-term one that also focuses on the quality and sustainability of its product and one that values and enhances the future of the communities in which it does business.

VHA intends Letters to Vail to promote more citizen involvement and community discussions of issues facing the Town. Public discussion of current issues by concerned citizens creates an environment to further our

community initiatives. We heartily encourage your input and, from time to time, will publish commentary from community members. It is time we talk to each other about the next steps along our road ahead.

We hope you will follow or participate in this ongoing VHA discussion. You are welcome to join-in as a paid-subscriber or member. Contact: vailhomeownersassoc@gmail.com

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