

Vail Sustainable Destination Dialogue
Grand View Room, Vail, CO
July 7th, 2016

Approximately 30 people attended the Sustainable Destination Dialogue including a mix of new residents, long-time residents, full-time residents, and part-time residents. Ages ranged from early 30's to late 70's. Notes were compiled by a staff member from Walking Mountains Science Center. Here is what dialogue participants had to say in response to the following question:

What is the significance of the Sustainable Destination Certification Project for Vail's future?

"It's going to become increasingly difficult for Vail to distinguish itself from other mountain resorts simply by skiing. We've done a great job with Bravo! Vail. This whole area of sustainability/environment can become a real distinguishing feature from a standpoint of tourism and for quality of life for residents. It's a wonderful project that will significantly enhance Vail's future. There will be a number of stages getting to the certification, there's a whole community effort here."

"Vail also has "dirty laundry" – how are those involved? How do we clean those up to not just check the boxes and attain the certification, but really live it the way we can be proud of?"

"There are many things that will take time to change. It's an organized effort. Cultural heritage is one of the criteria – for it to be protected."

"What about the whole Valley? It's not going to mean much if it's just the bubble of Vail."

"The structure we're dealing with (towns) is not unusual – maybe we ought to set the example, they (Global Sustainable Tourism Council) need another certification category – for the whole valley so it transcends the town politics."

"We're also looking to establish a new criteria for mountain resort communities specifically." (Vail will be a pilot.)

"The emphasis has been on business/economics and recreation more than the environment. In the early days of Vail, its competitor Aspen was known like Athens (for its creativity and progressive thought-leading culture), Vail was known like Sparta (for its warrior-like strength in getting started and its athletic culture). Today people say Aspen is ahead of Vail in terms of environmental sustainability, but we're probably more sustainable than Aspen."

"The certification is achievable, but the question is: So what? Would it really change the game? If you look at all these places – Park City/Steamboat/Jackson Hole – every one of them has the 'down valley' housing problem (as in, people can't afford to live close). No one has ever solved the worker/housing problem anywhere. If you could do that as part of the sustainable destination project, you could create a model. Let's use Town of Vail's 50 year celebration platform as a way to set a vision for the future."

"There's a lot of talk about housing at a regional level. There's a housing committee. The problem is far from solved. For the first time in 20 years, there are regional housing conversations happening quarterly and everyone shows up."

“For Vail, having these guidelines that balance tourism vs. year round community is important. A lot of funding of town is so sales tax driven that we’re quick to spend money on concerts and entertainment, which is good, but perhaps as a community we could agree on what a good balance would be. At what point is growth so overwhelming that no one is having a good experience?”

“This project needs to be supported by political leaders. When you read the mission statement of Town of Vail, this sustainable destination project is very relevant. Could part of this effort be to work on incorporating it into Vail’s mission statement and strategic plan so this initiative has the buy in of local political leaders? In addition to grassroots support.”

“Don’t underestimate the interest and passion of Vail’s second home owners – they care and often become full time residents.”

“Education, housing, and health care are the same issues that are affecting other places (like Chicago/Bay Area/etc). These issues are not unique to Vail. It’s important to establish benchmarks, goals, point person and be optimistic. Hearing the aggregate interest, we should never underestimate the power of community members partnering with business. It’s actually viable to consider it here, it’s a challenge but the scale makes it doable. Let’s use the entrepreneurial spirit – the answer is yes, the question is how? It’s highly possible.”

“We dove into the sustainable destination criteria, one of the things that was compelling is that the certification criteria takes us beyond environmental to include culture and our community of visitors/guests/residents. There is a structure and process. If most of the criteria and resulting action plan are done well, they add up to re-defining the identity of Vail at age 50.”

“My heart goes out to you. This is a discussion that is long overdue. Congratulations because this is needed, it’s possible, more importantly, we ought to be thinking about future generations. This project may currently be seen as just another project or initiative but it’s much more important – you can change the track of a place for the next 50 years.”

“The community coming together in pods...We struggle intellectually with these issues. What is sustainability?”

“Affordable housing has and will be on agenda forever because of growing population in a desirable area. One has to ask, if we haven’t solved this problem over the last 50 years, what is wrong?”

“There’s a hierarchy – you have to start with a sustainable economy. The latest figures show that the resort community economically has yet to prove that it’s sustainable. Businesses are not paying employees sustainable wages—it’s not possible in current paradigm where you need unskilled labor in an expensive town. The more we put off affordable housing, the harder it gets. If economy is not sustainable and cannot support community of workers and visitors – then what’s to be done?”

“Vail’s history is a series of unsustainable growth spurts. How much more should we be growing? As we continue to grow, we’re creating our own eventual failure. We need to examine the carrying capacity of what this area can sustain. We have to find ways, technologies, entrepreneurial income to incentivize the aspects of our economy and community that are not sustainable.”