



Memorandum

To: Vail Town Council

From: Department of Public Works
Community Development Department

Date: April 19, 2016

Subject: Recreational Trails in Vail

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past year and a half, the Vail Town Council and town staff have discussed various opportunities to improve the soft-surface trail system in Vail. These discussions have included alterations to the existing Vail Trail, an extension of the Vail Trail towards East Vail and concepts for other trail connections throughout town with a goal of connecting neighborhoods and improving access to existing trails.

Earlier this year, some members of the community raised concerns that the project was moving forward without community input and that it should either be postponed or canceled. The purpose of this memorandum is to initiate discussion on the future of the project and to present a recommendation for the Council to consider.

Following the presentation of the memorandum by town staff, the Vail Town Council will be asked to respond to the following question(s);

- **Should the town staff initiate a community engagement process of updating the 1994 Comprehensive Open Lands Plan?**

II. BACKGROUND

Non-paved or “soft surface” trails are an important amenity for residents and guests alike. They provide recreational opportunities and access to the natural environment for hikers, mountain bikers, trail runners, dog walkers, backpackers and even those out for an evening stroll. Further from town the trails are also utilized by equestrian and motorized users.

The idea to improve the trail system in Vail is derived from several places. Vail’s 1994 *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan (COLP)* lists trail improvements as the second priority identified by Vail citizens at that time, behind land acquisition. The *COLP* also includes a conceptual plan for trail system improvements. In addition, some residents have recently inquired if Vail would consider new trail opportunities after seeing the success of new trails in other mountain communities.

As presented previously, the benefits to improving Vail's trail network include:

- 1) Providing connections between neighborhoods, existing trails and Vail Mountain trails by creating a valley-floor and neighborhood level trail system.
- 2) Enhance trail access, recreation opportunities and alternative transportation routes throughout town.
- 3) Creation of trails tailored to hikers seeking less strenuous trails as well as beginner, first-time and youth mountain bikers.
- 4) Alleviate congestion on the paved recreation path system by providing parallel trails and alternate soft-surface routes
- 5) Alleviate congestion on Wilderness Area trails by providing additional trail opportunities
- 6) Provide new intermediate/advanced trails with the long-term potential of a Vail "loop" or "rim" trail at higher elevations.

When the idea to improve the town trail system was presented to the Town Council in 2014, it was met with interest and even enthusiasm. Staff was directed to begin evaluation of a specific trail segment to be located on the town-owned Katsos Open Space. The evaluation would determine the feasibility of such a project and provide the information required for a Planning and Environmental Commission application. The evaluation was later expanded to include the existing Vail Trail between Golden Peak and the Golf Course Clubhouse.

The evaluations included a tentative trail alignment, an environmental and hazard analysis and a determination of property ownership. Work was ongoing to prepare a submittal to the Planning and Environmental Commission, which would initiate the public approval process but was put on hold in early March.

III. PUBLIC INPUT

A number of citizens have expressed concerns over the concept of altering or extending the existing Vail Trail. And while many reasons were cited, the most common has been the concern that there has been little public process or outreach regarding Vail Trail alterations, or on the overall concept of trail improvements. Conversely, many citizens have shown their support not just for alterations to the Vail Trail but for new trails throughout town. As the Council has seen through numerous letters, there are multiple facets to this issue.

The *Comprehensive Open Land Plan*, which included significant public input during its development, may be a tool that allows both sides to be heard, and may also provide a path towards implementing the original COLP priority of improving the trail system in Vail.

IV. COMPREHENSIVE OPEN LANDS PLAN

The 1994 *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan* identifies parcels of land in Vail for acquisition or protection by the town. In addition, the document discusses trails as well as protection of environmentally sensitive areas and providing access to Gore Creek. The Plan's Executive Summary is attached however, staff encourages Council to review the full document, which can be accessed on the Town's website...

http://www.vailgov.com/docs/dl_forms/comprehensive_open_land_plan-1994.pdf.

A. Plan Summary

Purpose of the Comprehensive Open Lands Plan...

...to identify and develop strategies for acquiring or protecting key remaining open lands in Vail that would be valuable for recreation, protecting sensitive environmental resources, extending or connecting trails, providing adequate neighborhood open space and creating a small amount of contingency land for unforeseen needs.

Priorities for open space and recreation needs as identified by Vail citizens...

- 1) Acquisition, preservation and protection of natural open space;*
- 2) Improvement of the trail and bike path systems in and around the Town; and*
- 3) Creation of additional recreation opportunities in a regional context including a swimming pool, athletic fields and a recreation center.*

Parcels identified for acquisition were selected and prioritized per the following criteria...

- 1) Protect sensitive natural habitat areas, riparian areas and hazard areas; (ongoing)*
- 2) Extend the Vail Trail to East Vail and add several trailheads to access the trail;*
- 3) Add a new trail on the north side and western half of Town to connect existing trailheads and neighborhoods; (completed)*
- 4) Add three "trailheads" in the core areas to access Vail Mountain trails and inform visitors of trail opportunities and provide better access to Gore Creek*
- 5) Add bike lanes to the north and south Frontage Roads (completed) and add paved shoulders to Vail Valley Drive.*

B. Current Status of the Plan

Over the past two decades, many of the recommendations of the Plan have been completed or have received Council direction to not move forward. Samples of completed projects include:

- Construction of the North Trail
- Shoulder-widening on the Frontage Roads
- Public Works snow dump parcel
- Hud-Wirth parcel acquisition (Chamonix Housing Site)
- Middle Creek employee housing land acquisition
- Trailhead improvements
- Separated bike path between West Vail Interchange and Safeway/City Market

As for recommended parcel acquisition, a recent review by the Department of Community Development has shown that of 52 parcels identified for action/acquisition:

- 20 have been completed (39%)
- 9 are nearly completed (17%)
- 3 are not completed but the objective has been accomplished (6%)
- 15 are incomplete, with some potential for future acquisition (29%)
- 5 are incomplete with little or no potential for future acquisition (10%)

C. Future of the Open Lands Plan

While much has been accomplished through the Comprehensive Open Lands Plan, there are actions still to be completed. And, as a twenty year-old document, it is likely that there are new projects and actions to be considered. New actions that could be a part of a Plan Update include:

- Parcels important to Gore Creek water quality improvements
- A Gore Creek Access Plan aimed at protecting sensitive habitat while still providing access to Gore Creek for residents and guests for passive recreation as well as for kayaking, rafting and inner tube launch/take-out points
- Assessment of parcels identified but not yet acquired from the current Plan
- Additional trails and connections to neighborhoods as well as trails constructed “in a regional context” per Priority 3 of the existing Plan
- Improve wayfinding through trail signage, maps and digital means
- Update of current Action Plan

D. 2016 Comprehensive Open Lands Plan Update Process

The 1994 *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan* is in need of an update. The Open Lands Plan is very much an action-oriented plan whereby specific parcels of land were identified that required some form of action for either protection of sensitive lands, for trail easements and critical trail connections, or for future public use, such as the West Vail Fire Station. In the end, the action-oriented nature of the Open Lands Plan has lead to its successful implementation. To date, nearly all of the high and medium priority actions have been accomplished. Certain actions are no longer pertinent or relevant due to changes in conditions. And lastly, new actions may be necessary as a response to changes over time and changes in priorities for the community.

At the Town Council’s instruction, town staff recommends updating the existing *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan*. If instructed to do so, staff will assess whether to perform the update work in-house or to hire a planning consultant to assist with the project depending on the scope of work to be completed. Options can be presented at a future Council meeting that will include a more detailed project schedule and budget. Town staff further recommends assembling an Open Lands Plan Update working group to assist in the development of the plan update. The role of the working group will be to assist the town staff in identifying a recommended list of the issues and questions which should be considered by the Town Council prior to taking any action of the plan update. No more than three or four working group meetings are anticipated. In total, it is expected that the process to update the plan will take approximately 6-8 months. Staffing capacity currently exists to support this planning effort.

V. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

- 1) Instruct staff to initiate an update of the *Comprehensive Open Lands Plan* which includes a trail and trailhead planning component. If instructed to do so, staff will return with more details and information on the update process, including a schedule and proposed budget.
- 2) Assemble an Open Lands Plan Update working group comprised of Vail residents, business owners and other stakeholders and potentially affected parties. The group will be tasked with identifying needs, developing concepts, identifying feasibility components and representing various user groups. Additionally, the working group will be charged with assembling a recommended list of issues and questions which the Town Council should address prior to taking any further action on the plan update.
- 3) Complete the hazard analysis and environmental reports for the Vail Trail and Vail Trail extension. These projects were intended as feasibility analysis for the project and are very near completion. This information would be valuable for consideration during the update process of the Plan.

VI. ACTION REQUESTED BY COUNCIL

The town staff requests that the Vail Town Council respond to the following question(s):

- **Should the town staff initiate a community engagement process of updating the 1994 Comprehensive Open Lands Plan?**

Implementing the staff recommendations will allow significant public input into the idea of improving the soft surface trail system in Vail and provide an updated document to guide future open lands planning decisions.

Attachments:

- Executive Summary of the 1994 Comprehensive Open Lands Plan



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objectives of the Comprehensive Open Lands Plan are:

- To identify citizen and visitor needs and preferences for a comprehensive SYSTEM of open space uses such as parks, recreation, protection of environmental resources, trails, and reserve lands for public uses;
- To prioritize available open lands for acquisition or protection;
- To identify creative strategies to implement the acquisition and protection program; and
- To define a management system to appropriately manage Town-owned open space lands.
- To buffer neighborhoods with open space

An Open Lands Committee provided direction for the project and consisted of representatives from the Vail Town Council, Planning and Environmental Commission, U.S. Forest Service, Vail Associates, Vail Recreation District, Board of Realtors, and Town Staff.

The public involvement process consisted of four well-attended public meetings between August of 1993 and January of 1994. These meetings, along with a thorough review of all relevant planning and survey documents for the Town, resulted in a priority ranking of needs and uses for open space lands and recreational opportunities. This input led directly to the Comprehensive Open Lands Plan which identifies specific parcels and activities that should be pursued by the Town in order to realize the goals stated in both the public forum and previous community input on related plans.

The priorities for open space and recreation needs communicated by the citizens of Vail are, in order of priority:

1. Acquisition, preservation and protection of natural open space;
2. Improvement of the trail and bike path systems in and around the Town; and
3. Creation of additional recreation opportunities in a regional context including a swimming pool, athletic fields and a recreation center.

The concepts presented in this plan, developed as a result of this public input, describe connecting existing trail systems that are either incomplete or not interconnected, adding an extensive new trail system that essentially surrounds the Town and better interfaces with the National Forest System Lands and Vail Mountain, and protecting sensitive lands that are either along Gore Creek or part of the forest that extends into the Town. Extension of the streamwalk from the Village Core into Lionshead is desired by the community but objectionable to the adjacent property owners who fear loss of privacy and degraded views.

The Comprehensive Open Lands Plan is an action-oriented plan that identifies specific parcels of land that require some kind of action for either protection of sensitive lands, for trail easements and critical trail connections or for future public use, such as a West Vail fire station. Over 350 parcels were evaluated with fifty-one parcels of land on which actions are recommended. Recommended actions range from acquisition by the Town, trade with the U.S. Forest Service, acquiring trail easements, or purchasing development rights. In many cases, several options are available on a specific parcel, allowing flexibility in negotiations for both the landowner and the Town.

The objective has been to provide the Town with a menu of potential open space protection techniques at the least cost and management burden to the Town. For example, if an easement can be obtained from the landowner for a trail or to protect a site from development, generally this has been proposed as an alternative to outright acquisition. As a result, the land stays on the tax rolls and the Town is not responsible for general property management and maintenance. These "reduced rate" transactions can be beneficial for landowners since they can provide certain tax and estate planning benefits which meet a landowners financial objectives. A careful tailoring of transactions between landowners and the Town can produce mutually beneficial results.

Specific criteria were developed to evaluate these recommended actions in order to determine the areas of highest priority. Generally, actions received a high priority if they met the stated objectives of the Town and its' citizens and were an integral part of the open lands system. Within these fifty one parcels, there

are five priority areas made up of a number of recommended actions. These priority areas, shown on the Priority Plan in Exhibit 4 are (in order of priority):

1. Protect sensitive natural habitat areas, riparian areas, and hazard areas;
2. Extend the Vail Trail to East Vail and add several trailheads to access the trail;
3. Add a new trail on the north side and western half of Town to connect existing trailheads and neighborhoods;
4. Add three "trailheads" in the core areas to access Vail Mountain trails and inform visitors of trail opportunities and provide better access to Gore Creek;
5. Add bike lanes to the north and south frontage roads (the entire length of Town) and add paved shoulders to Vail Valley Drive.

For the past 13 years, the Town has had the use of tax funds generated from a Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT) for the purchase of open lands and development and maintenance of parks and trails. This fund can and should now be better leveraged to take advantage of the opportunities of both GOCO ("Great Outdoors Colorado") and other State funding and mutually beneficial negotiations with property owners.

The Town should now enter into a new cooperative management system with the U.S. Forest Service and Vail Associates Inc. to provide outdoor recreation and open space preservation. With adoption of this plan, there will be added management and maintenance requirements for the Town. The maintenance fund from the RETT Tax will need to grow in response to these new management requirements. Additionally, open space protection must go beyond zoning to ensure long-term protection. Options for this longer term protection may include requiring a public vote to change uses on open space lands or the use of a land trust to hold conservation easements on lands.