



Memorandum

TO: Vail Town Council

FROM: Community Development Department

DATE: February 7, 2017

SUBJECT: Comprehensive Open Lands Plan Update

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this agenda item is to inform the Town Council on the progress being made on the update to the 1994 Comprehensive Open Lands Plan. Specifically, the following information will be presented to Council:

- Summary of input received during the three community scoping sessions held in December and January (see below)
- Formation of a Technical Expert Group and research/analysis
- Upcoming community meetings
- Overall project schedule
- Next steps in planning process

II. BACKGROUND

In December, 2016, the Town authorized an update to the 1994 Comprehensive Open Lands Plan (the Plan). The process for updating the Plan involves revisiting the existing Plan to identify initiatives that have been addressed (and those that have not); evaluating via a community engagement process the goals, objectives and initiatives of the existing Plan; and drafting an updated plan with goals, objectives and initiatives identified during the process to address the community's needs.

One of the first steps in the process was to host three (3) Community Scoping Sessions. The purpose of these meetings was to inform the community about the existing plan and to understand what is on the community's mind with regard to the Open Lands Plan. No formal presentations were made. Rather, participants were asked to visit a number of stations, each of which provided information about the existing Plan and Town lands. After viewing these stations participants were asked to respond to a number of prompts, or questions about the use of public lands, the acquisition of land, and trails. These questions were also posted on the Town of Vail website to generate more public input. The Town received 58 written responses and 18 online responses.

III. SURVEY QUESTIONS AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

The 11 survey questions, and a brief summary of the public responses, are as follows:

Land Acquisition:

- *Dating back to the purchase of the Anholtz Ranch in 1973 (that became Ford Park), and the adoption of the Real Estate Transfer Tax in 1979, the Town of Vail has a long history of acquiring land for a variety of public purposes.*
 - *Have these efforts benefitted the community?*
 - *Should they be continued?*
 - *Should the Town continue efforts to implement Recommended Actions from the 1994 Open Lands Plan?*

Respondents were nearly unanimous in their belief that the Town's previous efforts to acquire land for public purposes have benefited the community. There was mixed opinion regarding the continuation of such practices. While many people support acquiring land for recreational opportunities or open space preservation, there is a noticeable group of respondents who do not believe the Town should acquire land for any sort of development activity. Affordable housing was a predominant response when citing their least favored option for land acquisition. Several people stated their concern that the term "public purposes" is much too broad and should be defined.

There were not many responses to the third sub-prompt regarding specific actions from the 1994 Open Lands Plan. Among those responding there was still general support for the Plan, and agreement that it is time for the plan to be updated.

- *The 1994 Open Land Plan identifies four main reasons for the acquisition of lands – to protect environmentally sensitive lands from development, to establish open spaces and neighborhood buffers, for the development of recreation trails and to provide land for other public uses.*
 - *Are these four reasons valid today?*
 - *Which of these reasons are most important to you?*
 - *Are there other reasons for acquiring lands that the Town should consider?*

There was nearly unanimous agreement that the first two reasons: "protect environmentally sensitive lands from development" and "to establish open spaces and neighborhood buffers" are still valid today. The responses to "the development of recreation trails" were mixed. Public comments ranged from complete disagreement to full support. Trails are discussed in more detail in later questions. Like the previous item, the responses to "provide land for other public uses" were highly mixed, but tended to be against acquiring land for any public use that promotes development of open space. Affordable housing was the most common objection to the acquisition of lands for public use. While many people expressed their belief that affordable housing is not a public use, there were others who argued for the acquisition of open space for affordable housing.

A recurring response in regards to other reasons for the Town to acquire lands was for wildlife and wildlife corridor protection. Others cited acquiring land for a community / recreation center and there was a lot of support for acquiring land for a disc golf course.

- *Recommended Actions from the 1994 Open Lands Plan focused on the acquisition of vacant, privately-owned land. The Town has also acquired developed lands as well, the old Wendy's site, the Arose "A frame" and Timber Ridge to name a few. In all instances these lands were re-purposed with new development. Should the Town consider the acquisition of developed, privately-owned land in order to further implement all the goals of this Plan?*
 - *If yes, what specific purposes do you feel would justify the purchase of developed land?*

The responses to this question ran from strong anti-acquisition sentiment to full support of more new land for development. While there were opinions at each end of the spectrum, many can be categorized as cautiously in favor as long as any development is carefully considered, open to public discussion and environmental integrity is maintained. Comments included support of public-private partnerships for housing and a belief that affordable housing can best be acquired through the redevelopment of existing properties rather than through conversion of open space.

- *Is it appropriate for the Town to consider the acquisition of USFS or other lands outside of the existing Town boundary in order to further implement the goals of this Plan? If not, why? If so, under what conditions or parameters might this be appropriate?*

The public comments were nearly unanimous in their opposition to the acquisition of USFS lands outside of the existing Town boundary. Those who did support the acquisition of the USFS lands were mostly in favor of the Town obtaining the USFS lands and then preserving it as undevelopable open space.

Trails:

- *The Town has an existing network of paved and "soft-surface" trails throughout the Town that accommodates a variety of users.... from hikers, to walkers, road bikers, mountain bikers, in-line skaters and babies in strollers.*
 - *How do you use the Town's trails and paths?*
 - *Do you see trails providing a benefit to the community? If so, how?*
 - *What steps could be taken to improve the Town's existing trail system?*

Most respondents were at least moderate users of the Town's trails and paths. While some stated that they just use trails for walking, many others are multi-use trail users that hike, bike, and even use them to commute to work. Respondents were unanimous that trails provide a benefit to the community. Benefits cited were physical and mental health, tourist amenities and economic impact, safety, mobility, connection to the outdoors, and promoting a healthy mountain lifestyle for the Town.

There were many suggestions to improve the Town's existing trail system, but one of the most frequent suggestions is for better signage along the trails. Specific issues mentioned included the amount of unofficial "social trails" that branch off and cause confusion and a lack of information as to the time, distance, and direction to destinations.

Another common theme among the suggestions to improve the existing trail system was the conflict between walkers and bicyclists. Many trail walkers expressed their concern about bicyclist etiquette.

Although the question asked specifically about the existing trail system, and not future trails, many respondents included such suggestions. As would be expected, comments ranged from a belief that the existing trails are sufficient and no new trails are needed to a belief that there should be more trails, especially more connections between existing trails. There were multiple comments from trail advocates that the Town needs more beginner level (flatter) trails.

- *The 1994 Open Lands Plan envisioned the concept of a trail system between neighborhoods “similar to trails found in the Alps where interconnected trails allow hikers to move around and to mountain villages.” with trailheads in each neighborhood. Notwithstanding the challenges of implementing such a concept (land ownership, environmental impacts, cost, etc.), what do you think of this idea?*

Responses to this question leaned to supporting this idea and expressed belief that the Town is already on its way to achieving such a goal. Some respondents like the idea, but expressed concern that the cultural differences between Europe and Vail may be too significant for the idea to be fully applicable to the Town. Others were cautiously in favor of such an idea provided there was sufficient environmental and wildlife protection. Finally, there was also a group of respondents that oppose the idea as unnecessary.

- *Trails provide both recreational opportunities and the ability for individuals to access and enjoy the Town’s open lands and adjoining USFS lands. However, new trails may have the potential to create adverse site impacts and introducing human activity may impact wildlife habitats. Balancing these factors is important when considering the development of new trails.*
 - *What factors are important to you (and why) when thinking about the potential development of new trails in Vail?*

Environmental and wildlife impacts were the most common responses as the factors most important to consider when thinking about the development of new trails in Town. Of those who cited such factors, some specifically stated their belief that it is possible for trails to be developed with minimal impact to the environment or wildlife. Similar to the previous questions, there is still a group of respondents who oppose the development of any new trails.

Use of Town Lands:

- *The Town has used its land to develop a variety of public facilities such as the town hall, library, visitor and transportation centers, parking structures, community rooms, parks, the gymnastic center, the golf course, and a number of housing developments.*
 - *How do you feel about the town’s existing facilities?*
 - *Are there new facilities that you think could be beneficial to the community?*
 - *How important is it for the Town to reserve land for future, unforeseen uses or needs?*

The Town's existing facilities were well received in public comments. No one expressed displeasure with the existing facilities and the most critical comments ranged from "adequate" to "satisfied."

There were many suggestions for new facilities, the most common being a community / recreation center, disc golf course, or swimming pool. Other suggestions for new facilities included: employee housing, small (local) performing arts center, a new Town Hall, public shower facility, additional overflow parking, and convention center.

Many of the respondents did not directly address the third prompt regarding the importance of reserving land for future, unforeseen uses or needs, but those who did generally agreed that it is very important for the Town to do so. A common theme was the belief that the Town will become denser and it is important to preserve open space now.

- *Creating, providing and retaining high quality, affordable, and diverse housing opportunities for Vail residents is one of the Town's major goals and regularly tops the list of priorities in the Community Survey. The 1994 Open Lands Plan advocated the use of town land and the acquisition of new lands to be used for housing."*
 - *Should housing initiatives be addressed in the updated Open Lands Plan and if so, how?*

One of the few questions with quantifiable responses, 38% of respondents believed housing initiatives should be addressed in the update. 41% did not believe housing initiatives should be addressed in the update, and the remaining 21% either did not respond or were unclear in their statement regarding housing initiatives. It is worth noting that this question probably prompted the most emotional responses. Of those opposing the inclusion of housing initiatives within the update, a primary reason was the belief that all of the open lands were intended to be forever open. Another reason people oppose housing initiatives in the plan is the belief that this is an issue that cannot be solved by the Town. Many respondents cited their belief that it is the responsibility of local employers to provide more housing. Other opponents believe that housing development should occur down valley.

Of those who support the inclusion of housing initiatives, a common theme was that their support is limited based on the context of the proposed housing.

- *Over the past few years the Town has implemented significant measures to improve the aquatic health of Gore Creek. Should the Open Lands Plan target the acquisition of land or easements specifically for the purpose of enhancing the health of Gore Creek?*
 - *Are there specific measures in this regard you would support?*
 - *What's important to you?*

The most agreed upon question, the public comments unanimously supported the efforts, including the acquisition of land easements, to enhance the health of Gore Creek. Commenters described Gore Creek in such terms as, "a vital cherished asset," "critical to energy of town," and "our spinal cord." Suggestion to improve the health of Gore Creek included: enforcement of existing regulations regarding the use of lawn chemicals and other pollutants, returning the bank of Gore Creek to natural vegetation,

and form public-private partnerships with existing property owners to mitigate negative impacts.

- *The development of Town land for housing or other public uses and the preservation of Town land for open space preservation can at times be conflicting goals and may lead to competing land use decisions.*
 - *What are the trade-offs for how the Open Lands Plan addresses these types of consideration?*
 - *Can the Open Land Plan find a balance between these potentially competing objectives?*

Similar to the other questions that referenced housing or “other public uses,” the public comments in regards to this question ranged along the entire spectrum. Nearly half of the total respondents did not reply to this question, or provided an unrelated statement. Of those directly responding to the question, 14 believe there can be a balance between the potentially competing objectives. 28 of the respondents do not believe a balance can be found and strictly oppose housing or other public uses. Of those respondents opposing housing, they commonly cited down valley as their preferred location for affordable housing and/or their belief that local employers should be responsible for housing. Like the previous question, opinions tended to be very strong.

IV. NEXT STEPS

The next step in the planning process is to conduct further evaluation of the goals, objectives, and the incomplete recommended actions from the 1994 Open Lands Plans in comparison to the input obtained through the Community Scoping Sessions. An analysis of all Town-owned lands and the formation of a Technical Expert Group are also ongoing. The Technical Expert Group is currently proposed to include the following organizations:

- Vail Recreation District
- Vail Resorts
- Eagle River Water and Sanitation District
- U.S. Forest Service
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Eagle Valley Land Trust
- Eagle River Watershed Council
- Eagle County Open Space
- Eagle County Trails

Does the Town Council wish to include other organizations within this list of technical experts?

The first Community Meeting where this information will be presented back to the public is scheduled for February 22, 2017 in the Grand View Room at Lionshead. After the first Community Meeting, another update on the planning process will be presented to Town Council, currently scheduled for March 7, 2017.