

Housing and Resort Communities-

Residents of Vermont resort towns have struggled with limited housing opportunities, service industry wages and a high cost of living for a number of years. In the last decade as the cost of property has soared there has been a lot of publicity about the need for more reasonably priced housing. In spite of the increased awareness, proposals for affordable housing often meet with organized resistance from neighbors and townspeople. Some are afraid of the impact that housing may have on their small communities. Maybe it's time to think about the issue in a different way; that quality housing projects can have a positive influence on towns and villages.

In the Rocky Mountains, home of many fine ski resorts, growth in the last decade has been tremendous. Eagle County, location of Beaver Creek, Vail Resorts, and Arrowhead has expanded from 22,000 residents in 1990 to 41,000 in 2001. The projected population for 2025 is 76,000. They have a housing problem. Housing costs have steadily increased with the rise in demand and the arrival of many newcomers willing to spend big bucks on their own piece of paradise. The average sale price in 1990 was \$210,000; in 2001 it reached \$585,000. During the same decade the median family income rose from \$38,000 to \$74,000.

The county includes a number of small towns, similar in size to many in Washington County. Vail's population is approximately the same as the three towns of the Valley, just under 5,000. The small towns of Avon, Gypsum and Basalt have all seen their populations more than double in 10 years. Avon is at the top of the list increasing from 1800 to 5700 people. The result has been that the towns have become involved in assisting and promoting the building of new units to meet the needs of residents and employers. One of the County Commissioners put it this way "Growth in Eagle County has put tremendous pressures on the available housing in all of our communities, to the extent that no single entity can fully address the issue." The extreme pressure has encouraged the formation of partnerships to create new housing. A recent project known as Miller Ranch will ultimately provide 282 units of housing within the financial reach of many residents of Eagle County. It will be a mixed project of condominiums, townhouses and single family homes and will include parks, trails and ball fields. The architects based their traditional building designs on the simple homes associated with the local ranching heritage. ASW Realty, Eagle County, the Town of Vail, Eagle County School District and Colorado Mountain College worked in partnership to meet the local need. It's the largest public-private affordable housing project to be built in the area. Miller Ranch is located in the Town of Edwards a short drive from Vail and Beaver Creek resorts. Edwards is home to another project called Riverwalk, a village type development along the Eagle River which reserves some condominiums at a reduced rate for County employees.

The Town of Vail is currently constructing an employee housing development of 140 rental units that includes an early education center. The Vail Housing Authority partnered with a Denver developer to design and finance the project on land leased from the town. The rent is far from inexpensive ranging from \$545 for a studio up to \$1700 for a 3 bedroom. The \$23 million project will use a state grant and private bonds to reduce rental rates.

The projects are possible because of the pro-active thinking of the towns and their partners. Building housing that's affordable for residents and area employees isn't something that requires an apology. It's a necessity and the Towns are trying to meet the challenge. The Town of Eagle has a Local Employee Residency Program; their goal is to increase the local supply of affordable homes for residents and area employees. "Helping Preserve Community Through the Creation of Affordable Housing" is the tagline they use on their website. It sends a positive message. Basalt requires that all new residential developments integrate affordable housing into their projects. Vail has a municipal Housing Division and advertises the availability of affordable units on the town website. The town offers interest free loans to eligible employees for leasing or purchasing a home, and it has a down payment assistance program.

Small towns can make a difference, by supporting the creation of new housing, partnering with businesses and organizations that are also feeling the impact of the housing shortage and working with builders and developers to create a project that meets community goals. It's unlikely that a project of several hundred units would ever be proposed in the Valley. The Vermont landscape is completely different in scale and settlement patterns from the western states. However, as in Colorado, there is a demand for reasonably priced housing that is not being met. The people that would benefit from the creation of more housing include: young families, people working in the tourism and service industries, non-profit workers and those just beginning their careers.

To make it happen in the Mad River Valley would require the skills of talented, persuasive people. Considering the local resources it is entirely possible here with the right combination of vision and determination. To borrow from the Vermont Housing Awareness Campaign, Housing is the Foundation of Vermont Communities. Vermont's wage and housing crisis is putting at risk a resource that is indispensable to our prosperity: good workers.