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Can the Vail Trail find common ground?

VAIL — The first question at a Vail-sponsored open house about trails brought the only unanimous response. Everyone at the meeting uses town and area trails. After that, agreement was harder to find.

Town officials held the open house to provide updates about efforts to bolster the valley's trail system, both for paved and unpaved, or "soft" trails. But most of the people who filled the Grand View meeting room atop the Lionshead parking structure were there to learn about, and talk about, the Vail Trail.

Today, the Vail Trail is a narrow path that meanders between Golden Peak and the Vail golf course. The idea is to improve that trail, keeping it narrow but, perhaps, making it more accessible to more people.

Town landscape architect Gregg Barrie said current plans are far from final. The concept, though, is to make a trail somewhat similar to the popular North Trail in town. There, a trail platform about four feet wide was built. Vegetation grew in to create a path that, in most places, is around two feet wide.

Barrie said there are a lot of options available. But before any construction starts, Barrie said, there's a lot of paperwork that must be completed.

TWO PHASES

Town officials are looking at building the trail in two phases. The Vail golf course clubhouse is where one phase would end and another begin.

The idea — still subject to public hearings before both the Vail Town Council and the Vail Planning and Environmental Commission — is to build from the clubhouse east to roughly the Vail Memorial Park, near the Interstate 70 East Vail interchange. That segment would cross mostly town-owned open space.

Barrie said that segment could help eliminate some of the current unauthorized trails across the property.

But it's the segment from the clubhouse to Golden Peak that's drawn the most attention from residents. It will also require the most pre-construction work.

About half that trail segment runs across U.S. Forest Service land. That's going to require some federal-level evaluation, especially since that portion of trail was somehow left off a comprehensive travel management plan that agency completed a few years ago.

About 25 percent of the trail also runs across private property. Doing any kind of new work on the trail will require the town and property owners to sign contracts known as easements that allow a public trail to cross that land.

Barrie said those easements won't be finished until later this year, and the Forest Service won't come in until nearly the end of the year, at best.

RESIDENTS SPEAK UP

That came as something of a comfort to longtime resident Tom Vucich, who is urging a slower approach to planning any improvements.

"I'd urge the town council and staff to step back (and) take a deep breath," Vucich said, adding that he'd like analyses of potential environmental issues to include both the east and west segments of the proposed trail.

Resident AnneMarie Mueller was particularly concerned about the rockfall potential of the western portion of the trail.

"Imagine one rock falling on one child," Mueller said, adding that a tragedy would send the message that "we're not responsible enough to think ahead that far."

Longtime valley resident John Bailey, a member of Eagle County's ECO Trail's committee, said that work on the Vail Trail might be a way to mitigate future avalanche danger in the future.

Bailey said that the question raised by the proposal should be "how can we make this work?"

Barrie said whatever the future holds for the Vail Trail, "It's going to take work, it's going to take compromise, it's going to take discussion."

After the meeting, Vucich said he believed that what had been a fast-paced process seems to have slowed, thanks to residents speaking up.

"In the last two weeks they have slowed down," Vucich said. "I'm hopeful that will continue."

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of 3



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