

New housing efforts in Eagle County, other mountain communities, still leave large gaps for locals

The price increases from the last real estate boom hit local buyers hard

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The first 36-unit apartment building at Colorado Mountain College's Edwards campus is open. A second building will be opened in January, and a third building is in the works.

Chris Dillmann/Vail Daily archive

Here's the good news: There's been a lot of progress since 2019 on workforce housing in Colorado's mountain communities. Here's the bad news: We're still falling behind.

The Northwest Colorado Council of Governments and the Colorado Association of Ski Towns, along with the U.S. Economic Development Administration, recently [released a report](#) on the status of workforce housing throughout the region. The report includes data from communities including Aspen, Steamboat Springs, Telluride and Vail, as well as the counties in which those towns are located. The report also includes data from Whistler, British Columbia.

[Read the report](#)

The latest regional workforce housing report is available on the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments [website](#).

The volumes of data include numbers for housing units in communities, the number of full-time residents, as well as percentages of

The report notes that local governments in the region have “sprinted ahead in the affordable housing game” since the year just before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, “The cumulative impact of rising mortgage rates, lack of housing stock, lack of construction workers and the pandemic boom cycle widened a chronic affordability gap...”

“In other words, the marketplace for attainable housing is broken,” the report notes, “and the only way most workers whose wages are tied to the local economy can step into the housing marketplace (even to rent) is with some combination of a handup from government-subsidized housing, down-payment assistance and market regulation.”

Vail Housing Director George Ruther said the report doesn’t provide many surprises. Instead, he said, it shows the need for flexibility.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all solution,” Ruther said.

Flexibility requires policymakers to remain “proactive” when it comes to changing situations. For instance, a 0.25% increase in interest rates in the past year has dramatically cut the potential buyer pool for Vail’s Chamonix townhome project.

Broader trends can also be a surprise, Ruther said. No one could have predicted the COVID-influenced population shift into the region, with many second homes becoming primary residences, and a real estate boom that drove prices to new highs.

“You can’t plan for that,” he added. But, while the town’s [Vail InDeed program](#) has slowed due to both competition for homes and rising prices, Ruther noted that the town’s current spending on that program – roughly \$13 million to date – has provided deed-restricted housing for about 400 residents. That’s roughly the same number of people that will be housed in the town’s proposed [West Middle Creek](#) apartment project. That project currently carries a price tag of about \$100 million.

While he’s been focused on Vail, Ruther said Steamboat Springs and Breckenridge are doing well in housing for locals.

Breckenridge “has just been silently checking the boxes ... long before anyone at the State House was involved,” Ruther said.

Eagle County Housing Director Kim Bell Williams noted that the county’s efforts have been spurred by the \$50 million sale of the Lake Creek Village apartments. The Eagle County Board of Commissioners directed the housing staff to spend that money on housing efforts, and the staff has done just that, Bell Williams said.

More than for-sale housing

The county’s housing funds have gone to efforts beyond for-sale housing. Bell Williams noted the county now offers both homeless services and rental assistance. Help for renters – specifically, loans to help people cover move-in costs – usually includes the first and last months’ rent and a damage deposit. That effort has been “wildly successful,” Bell Williams said. “How can any of us cover” those initial costs, she asked.

In addition, Bell Williams said, “the level of cooperation and idea sharing (between communities) is at the highest I’ve ever seen it.”

As with any pervasive problem, though, there’s always more work to do.

Vail resident Bobby Lipnick is a member of the [Eagle County Housing Task Force](#), a volunteer group dedicated to spurring more action regarding workforce housing. Lipnick is also a member of the Vail Planning and Environmental Commission. In that role, Lipnick said some new town initiatives have the potential to be helpful.

Lipnick noted that board has helped create a housing zoning district that will allow developers to build workforce housing without delays of months – or years – and the uncertainty that often comes with applications.

Defining standards for that zoning district – including site coverage, parking and other factors – “will hopefully promote private sector investment,” Lipnick said.

Those regulations help create a “predictable review process,” Lipnick said.

Lipnick added that while the community is “still behind the 8-ball” in terms of workforce housing, “we’re making headway.”